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UPON CUTTING THE WIRES THE DETECTIVE WENT DOWN THE POLE RAPIDLY.

OR, WIPING OUT THE

BLACK OATH GANG.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS,
AUTHOR OF "THE HAYSEED DETECTIVE,"
"THE RACE-COURSE DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOILED.

THERE was a row in the Golden Glory saloon.

The game had been running steadily as usual, with Abe Kimball himself, the proprietor, dealing. Several bull-punchers leaned against the bar, carelessly watching the cards thrown out of the box, while half a dozen were following the elusive twists of the faro game, and trying to at least break even.

But luck was with the house that night,

and Abe had taken in almost everything the players had in the way of chips and money.

Suddenly Pete Morrelli the Mexican, with the long, snaky hair, and a black mustache that drooped low at the sides of his mouth, impatiently pushed back the front of his flapping sombrero and banged his fist upon the table so that the chips danced, and a dozen rolled to the floor.

"Eet's not a square game! Me know eet! An' you, Abe Kimball, know eet!"

Abe Kimball, a quiet-looking fellow of about forty, with a pale face, in remarkable contrast to the sun-burned visages on every side of him, stroked his black mustache calmly, and took from his vest pocket a handsome gold watch.

Pete was leaning over the table, looking at him somewhat apprehensively, while the other men in the great saloon, with its rough board walls and doors, and its smoking coal-oil lamps in sconces or hanging from the dingy rafters ceiling, were enjoying the excitement.

Abe studied his watch, and Pete found himself taking an inventory of the articles of dress of the cool, imperturbable gambler, with the handsome watch in his hand.

This is what Pete saw: A vest and coat of dark cloth, evidently cut by a fashionable tailor, while the neat crease down the front of the trousers showed that the wearer paid scrupulous attention to his personal appearance. There were well-fitting shoes, brightly polished, on the shapely feet, and the white shirt with its stiff, clean collar, and its white necktie, in which was fastened a large solitaire diamond, were all of the finest linen. Abe's hair was brushed as carefully as that of any business man in New York, and the silk hat that lay on a chair by his side was evidently new.

Abe Kimball was a gentleman in appearance as well as in manner. He was in his shirt-sleeves, for the convenience of dealing and because the room was warm, but his coat was arranged on a wire "shape," hanging on the wall behind him, and it was decidedly of a city style, suggesting nothing of the wild environments in which he found himself now.

"Well, vat you do?" demanded Pete, at last.

"I gave you two minutes to take that back, and one minute is gone already," answered Abe, coolly.

"Vat you mean?"

"It's nearly a minute and a half now," was the quiet answer, as Abe watched the second hand of his watch.

With an inarticulate howl Pete drew a revolver and pointed it straight at the face of Abe Kimball.

Kimball put his watch in his pocket and looked calmly at the Mexican.

"I can guess the rest of the time," he said.

"I vill shoot!" howled Pete, as his finger moved nervously on the trigger of his sixshooter.

"Shoot? Not much you won't!" replied Abe, sternly, but in a low tone.

"Yes, I vill."

But although Pete made the threat he did not pull the trigger.

"Oh, no."

"I vill, I tell you! I keel you!"

"Kill me? Why, you yaller cuss, you hev'n't the nerve ter pull th' trigger! You are too much of a coward!"

Abe Kimball's black eyes seemed to dart fire, as he held his hands clasped behind him and looked straight into the face of the Mexican.

Pete's hand trembled, but his finger seemed to have lost the power to press the trigger that would have moved so easily and sent the daring American to the other world in a twinkling.

"Kill me, if you dare!"

Abe Kimball smiled as he said this, and the Mexican moved forward, as if he would thrust the pistol into the mouth of the mocking gambler regarding him so scornfully.

"Well?"

Kimball was lounging in an easy attitude, against the back of his big chair, with his hands still behind him.

Pete hesitated a second, and then dropped his pistol to his side and turned to sneak out of the door.

As he did so, Kimball stepped behind him and gave him a hearty kick that sent him flying into the night.

"Gentlemen, take a drink with the house," invited Abe Kimball, as the Mexican disappeared.

Pete Morrelli went out in such a hurry that he did not see two men sitting on a log at the edge of the "street," as it was called, because it happened to be the main thoroughfare of Devil's Canyon. It was, however, nothing more than a rough, uneven space on which were half a dozen wooden stores.

Pete fell headlong, and, catching his feet in a tangle of large stones, fell sprawling upon the two men.

As he stumbled, one of the men seized him by the neck and threw him to the left, while the other caught him and hurled him to the right.

"Yer yaller hound! Whar air yer fallin'? Ain't yer got no sense?"

It was the man on the left who spoke. The note of contempt in his tone seemed uncalled for by the accident of Pete's stumbling, but it was explained by his companion, who dug his elbow viciously into the Mexican's ribs, as he said:

"Ther dirty skunk let Kimball kick him out o' ther saloon when ther Greaser hed ther drop on him. What's ther use o' sich er feller in our gang at all, I'd like ter know?"

Both men wore flannel shirts, leather leggings edged with fringe, and the broad, flapping hats of the cowboy.

The one on the right had a villainous squint, and therefore was known as "Cock-eyed Sam." "Tain't no use er kickin' on ther Greaser, though, I s'pose. When is ther redskin ter come along?" he asked.

Before his companion could answer, Pete touched Sam on the elbow, and whispered:

"Me see him!"

Immediately the Mexican sneaked under the shadow of the saloon, and slunk away, the others following, for there stood the redskin, as if awaiting them.

It was dark, but the erect carriage and a certain wild grace with which he held his blanket around him indicated clearly enough that this was the man they had expected.

"Wal?" demanded Cock-eyed Sam.

"Whar is he?" asked the other.

"Me have him, Jim Brill. Me good Indian."

"Of course—durned good! All Indians are—specially 'Paches."

"'Pache great warrior, Jim Brill! 'Pache not a squaw. Me big chief. Me Bad Thunder!"

"Yer a liar!" retorted Jim Brill, gruffly. "Yer name is Buck Higgins around hyar. Don't give me nothin' about yer Bad Thunder, or I'll break yer face! Whar's this Maricopa cuss thet we hev ter do up?"

"He's coming. See. He on the trail of the 'Pache chief."

"Soon be hyar?"

"Before the moon shines on the edge of the canyyn. I have spoken," responded the Indian, with cold dignity.

"Hist! Down!" suddenly warned the Mexican, as he dropped to his knees close to the back of the house.

Jim Brill and Cock-eyed Sam both did the same, but Bad Thunder only crept closer to the wall, erect.

For a minute all four remained perfectly quiet, as a boy, whistling softly in sheer enjoyment of life, moved swiftly toward them.

To his death, perhaps!

The Mexican drew his revolver, but Jim Brill, who was close enough to see the act, seized the arm with a clutch that almost made him yell with pain.

"Yer yaller-skinned fool! Put away thet gun! This hyar is er business of knives!"

The Mexican replaced his revolver in his belt, and drew a long, keen knife. The other two did the same, while the Indian, with his back against the house, stood with his arms folded, looking in the direction of the footsteps that were plainly heard on the hard ground.

"Ready, thar, Buck?" asked Sam, softly.

"Black Thunder always ready," was answered.

The crouching men were waiting to murder this boy coming toward them so unsuspectingly.

"Now, Jim. I'll give him ther fust whack. If that don't finish him, you give him another. And, see hyar, Pete; you keep a lookout."

"Me know vat to do. Vat the Indian do?"

"Let the Indian alone. He knows his business."

Was it a smile that passed over the immobile features of the redskin, who stood, wrapped in his blanket, silent and immovable as an image? It may have been, but, as it was too dark for his companions to see his face, it was unnoticed.

The boy came along, and, at that moment the edge of the moon peeped over the ridge of the distant mountains, and thus illumined his features.

He was about eighteen, and although the straight nose and sharp, dark eyes were those of an Indian, his skin was white, and his hair, massed in ringlets over his head, showed in a wealth of dark brown beneath the broad brim of his sombrero. He wore the regular dress of a cowboy, and a sixshooter could be seen in his belt.

Any experienced Westerner would have pronounced him a half-breed in an instant.

On he came until he had reached the corner of the house, inside of which the card game had been resumed, with Abe Kimball dealing, as calmly as if he had not looked down the muzzle of a revolver during the evening.

The boy stood a minute at the corner, feeling inside his flannel shirt, as if to make sure of something there that he would require. He drew out a note, looked at it, and replaced it in his shirt. Then he stepped briskly toward the front entrance of the Golden Glory Saloon.

He had barely got his hand out of his shirt again, when a dark figure sprang upon him, and bore him to the ground. At the same instant the boy instinctively caught at a knife that flashed above him.

Although only a boy, this young half-breed had strength nearly equal to that of the Mexican with whom he was struggling.

"Maladetta! Jeem!"

As the Mexican cried out, in a guarded tone, Jim Brill rushed to him, with knife uplifted, while Cock-eyed Sam watched the door of the saloon.

The Mexican had disobeyed orders by attacking the boy, and had thus disarranged their plans. To this the boy was indebted for his life thus far. Had Pete kept watch, so that Cock-eyed Sam could have sprung upon the lad first, there would have been little more to tell.

Jim could not get at the boy in the darkness, as he and Pete rolled over and over each other, but the boy could not reach his revolver, and was, therefore, at the mercy of his assailants.

He could have cried out, and thus alarmed the men inside the Golden Glory Saloon, but the lad was partly Indian, and he would have died rather than scream like a squaw.

"Hold him like thet er minute, an' I'll do ther job!" whispered Jim, as the Mexican held the boy so that his breast was exposed.

With a mighty effort Pete obeyed, and Jim threw himself upon the two.

As he did so, the Apache took a hand!

Silently and swiftly the Indian threw aside his blanket and caught Jim Brill by the throat.

There was a muttered oath from Brill, as he found himself in the hands of an enemy against whom his own strength, considerable as it was, seemed to be of as little avail as that of a child.

Cock-eyed Sam had gone around the house to the back, where he had fancied there was some noise, and did not see this movement of the Indian at first.

The Apache held the surprised Brill by the neck with a grasp that threatened to choke him before he could utter a cry.

"Let me go, yer cussed red, or I'll hev yer hanged afore yer kin git er mile away from Devil's Canyon! You know what they'll do to er skulkin' 'Pache around hyar."

For answer, the Indian tightened his grasp, and pulled him away from the lad, who still lay on the ground, with the Mexican holding him, a helpless prisoner.

With a powerful effort the Apache threw Jim Brill so violently aside that he went headlong into the road, and, his head striking a big stone, he lay senseless for the time being.

The Mexican could not get his knife arm free, and the boy had a chance of tiring him out.

Something then advised Cock-eyed Sam that there was a slip in their plans, and he came around the corner hastily, knife in hand.

He saw the Apache without his blanket, and was just in time to witness the throwing away of Jim.

"Them cussed Indians is ez treacherous ez coyotes—every one o' them," he muttered, as he jumped upon the back of the redskin and tried to stab him. But the Apache, with apparent ease, swung himself around, and catching Cock-eyed Sam under the arm, threw him a complete somersault into the road by the side of his companion.

"Maladetta!" grunted Pete, as the boy managed to release one of his arms, and gave the Mexican a punch that made his nose bleed.

The Apache stooped, and in a second Pete Morrelli was also in the road, where the three desperadoes formed a squirming heap.

The boy was on his feet in an instant, and as he ran close to the Indian to look into his face, the door of the Golden Glory Saloon opened wide, and a flood of lamplight made the scene bright as day.

The Indian was facing the light, and the boy started back, as he saw that it was not an Indian at all, but a fair-haired, blue-eyed young man, not many years older than himself, dressed in the buckskin shirt and fringed leggings and moccasins of a scout!

"Who are you?" cried the boy.

The fair-haired young man smiled, as he answered, in a singularly musical voice:

"Christopher Vance! You know me."

"Better known as Keno Kit, the Arizona Detective!" put in Abe Kimball, quietly, as he stepped in front of the young man.

CHAPTER II.

THE DOCUMENT OF DEATH.

To explain the action of the last chapter it will be necessary to go back a week.

In a bedroom in the Golden Glory Hotel were four men. They were Cock-eyed Sam, Jim Brill, the Mexican, Pete Morrelli, and a well-dressed, smooth-tongued man, who, from his dress, was a city dweller.

This city man wore a neat Prince Albert coat, that he had thrown open, and thus displayed a heavy gold watch-chain across his vest, and a large diamond in his shirt front.

He had a number of official-looking papers, with a great deal of scroll-work, and blanks for writing in other matter, spread before his companions on the rough table, which was lighted by a coal-oil lamp, with a broad shade.

"Now, gentlemen," he was saying, in persuasive accents, as he looked sharply

from one to the other from beneath his heavy black brows, "this is a straight matter of business, and I want you to regard it as such."

"Wal, go ahead. We know all about thet," interposed Cock-eyed Sam, rather impatiently.

The city man showed all his white teeth in a smile, that, somehow, suggested the snarl of a wolf, in spite of his urbanity, as he responded: "I like to make myself clear as I proceed. Well, as the accredited agent of the Humanity Life Insurance Company, of Chicago, New York, and London, here is my proposition."

"Beesness! Beesness!"

It was Pete Morrelli that interrupted this time, and the agent did not condescend to notice him, but continued, as if no one had spoken:

"This young Maricopa Indian, who has been educated at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and who is, to all intents and purposes, as much a civilized American as any of us, is under your guardianship, I believe, Mr. James Brill?"

"Sartin! The old man up in Prescott—yer brother, Roland Bland—wot wuz instremetal in hev'in' him sent up ter thet thar place—the Indian school—at Carlisle guv him ter me when he died, an' I've kep' er fatherly eye on him ever since."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," observed the agent, with perhaps the faintest suggestion of irony, that was not perceived by any of his companions.

"Oh, I dunno about thet. But go on."

"Now, you want to insure his life in the Humanity Company for \$20,000, I believe?" said the agent, smoothly.

"Now, look hyar, Mister Bland! Wot air yer givin' us?" suddenly broke in Sam, with a slam of his fist on the table that made it shiver. "You know we hev this hyar thing all fixed up, ez well ez we do. So don't let's have no more o' this hyar guff. I'm sick on it. And so is me pard, Jim Brill."

"An' me," put in the Mexican.

"Of course, gentlemen—" began Mr. Bland, the agent, with his sweetest smile, but Cock-eyed Sam would not let him proceed further. He broke in with:

"Thet's all right. I hez ther floor. Wot we want ter do is jist this: You make out thet thar policy for twenty thousand plunkers on this hyar kid's life; then we does him up ez soon ez we kin, an' we does it neat an' business-like. Then you gits the money fer us, an' ther three on us divvies."

"Ze four of us, you mean," suggested Pete.

"Yes, thet's what I said, didn't I? Ther four on us, o' course."

"You didn't say so at first," growled the Greaser.

"You put it very well, Mr. Ward," laughed the agent.

"I ain't no Mr. Ward. I'm jist plain Sam Ward, or Cock-eyed Sam, an' I don't want no guff."

"Certainly not. Well, gentlemen, here is the policy. I have arranged all the formalities. Got the doctor's certificate, and all complete. All you have to do is to sign, and hand me a hundred dollars in gold for the first year's premium. It's less than the usual rate, but I told you I would make it easy in this case."

Jim Brill and Cock-eyed Sam took the policy, with its flourishes and golden scroll-work, and scrutinized it carefully, while Guy Bland, the agent, sat back in his chair, and delicately trimmed the nails of his white hands with a pearl-handled penknife.

A rather remarkable-looking man, this Guy Bland. He had a long, hooked nose, and a high, white forehead, on which his heavy black eyebrows stood out as if they were pasted on. He had a big black mustache, that was waxed to a point on either end, giving him something the look of a Parisian. His eyes were dark and piercing, and they were always on the watch.

While the two cowboys were boggling over the policy, that was utterly beyond

their comprehension, he was more than ordinarily watchful, in spite of the smile that played about his mouth.

"Say, Mr. Bland, would yer mind goin' down ter ther bar while we three fellers talks this over?" asked Cock-eyed Sam, at last.

With his smile still in full radiance, the agent bowed, and left the room, taking down a heavy wooden bar to let himself out, which bar was carefully replaced by the Mexican as soon as the door was closed again.

"So. I think I have those fools," muttered Bland, as he walked down the rough stairs in the dark, to reach the barroom. "These blockheads really believe that they can get \$20,000 as easily as that, I suppose! Well, so long as they get that boy out of the way, I don't care. That snug little legacy of \$100,000 which goes to him, under the old man's will—if he lives, but that comes to me, as next of kin to that same old man, Roland Bland, if he should happen to die—will be all right, if those fellows put him out of the way, whatever may be their motive. Ha, ha!"

Guy Bland chuckled under his breath, and, opening the door of the saloon, where the everlasting faro game was in operation, he nodded to Abe Kimball, and took a quiet drink at the bar.

Abe returned the nod, but said nothing aloud. He made a remark under his breath, however, and this is what it was:

"Thar's thet or'nary cuss of a Guy Bland. Whenever he shows up in these parts, he hez some deviltry afoot, an' I know it. Wonder what his game is this time?"

Evidently Abe did not consider the "game" of Guy Bland likely to affect the safety or welfare of the Golden Glory Saloon, for he kept on dealing without again turning his face in Bland's direction.

For fifteen minutes Mr. Bland stood in front of the bar, sipping at the whisky in his glass, and waiting for what was to come.

At last he distinguished a faint scraping over his head, as of some one shuffling on the floor above with a heavy boot; at which signal he walked casually to the door and made his way calmly up-stairs.

The door of the upper room opened as soon as he gained the top of the staircase, showing that his friends were waiting for him, and he stepped inside, smiling around him as the Mexican barred the door again.

"Well, gentlemen?"

"Wal, we've made up our minds ter sign this hyar dockymment, supposin' ez you signs this other one."

It was Cock-eyed Sam Ward that spoke, and he did it impressively, tapping the spread-out policy with the back of his hand.

"Gentlemen, it is all a matter of form. I will sign the other one of course. I suppose you are ready with the hundred dollars?"

"Ther cash is all right. Don't worry yerself about thet," grunted Jim Brill.

Pen and ink were on the table, and James Brill put his signature on the paper, all uphill, with a great deal of manual labor, Mr. Bland watching him with a curious smile.

Cock-eyed Sam put his name on, as a witness, and the Mexican followed suit.

The men had an idea that the more names on the policy the more binding it would be, and the smiling Guy Bland agreed with them.

Then there was a great digging into an inside pocket of Jim Brill's shirt, from which he brought forth five twenty-dollar gold pieces, he having arranged with his two companions for them to pay their share afterward.

Guy Bland slipped the money into his pocket carelessly, and then looked inquiringly at Brill.

Jim produced another paper, quite as official looking as the policy (it having, in fact, been written by Bland and handed to them previously).

Guy looked at it as if he had never seen it before, as a matter of etiquette; then he signed it in a bold, free hand. Jim Brill put it in his pocket inside his shirt, and the conference was over.

"Now, gentlemen, I suppose I can depend on your not wasting any time over your end of the business?" observed Bland, politely.

"We won't waste no time," assured Brill.

"Do it up so that there will be no trouble for you afterward. You know what I mean. No violence, or anything of that sort."

The three men laughed aloud at this, and Bland's gentlemanly smile grew a little broader.

"You know," he continued, "they hang for murder, even in Arizona, and it would be awkward if you were to stretch hemp just about the time you were preparing to take the \$20,000. So I warn you all to be careful."

"We don't need no warning," answered Cock-eyed Sam, in a surly tone. "We know our biz."

"Well, you'll come down stairs and join me in a drink, before I go? I am going to ride to Phenix to-night, on a little business. My horse is down in the street all ready."

The three followed Bland from the room, for they required but one invitation to drink, at any time.

As they left the room a face that had been close to the window for the last fifteen minutes disappeared.

The face was that of Christopher Vance, commonly called Keno Kit!

CHAPTER III.

A DOUBLE GAME.

There was a muttered oath from Cock-eyed Sam, as he saw how easily the game of himself and his companions had been overthrown by Keno Kit, while the boy, with his picturesque hat thrown back from his head, looked from one to the other, and calmly replaced his knife in his belt.

"It's all right, gentlemen. I'm glad I happened along at the time I did. I know, of course, it was just a private quarrel between you and this boy, but I thought it was rather too much for three full-grown men to be scrapping with a youngster."

"None o' yer bizness," growled Cock-eyed Sam.

"Precisely. None of my business, 'cept I hez er way o' poking my nose inter anything ez looks like fun, yer know."

Keno Kit smiled provokingly as he spoke. Then, turning to the boy, he asked:

"What's yer name, kid?"

"Otis Garland Bland."

"Son of old Roland Bland, up in Maricopa?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I'd advise yer ter be keerful o' yer company. These gentlemen—" with a sweeping gesture toward Jim Brill, Cock-eyed Sam, and Pete Morrelli.

"We ain't no gentlemen. We are—"

"I beg yer pardon. These blackguards, then—"

There was a threatening movement by Jim Brill, but before he could get his hand to his revolver, Keno Kit had covered him with his own weapon, and Brill's hands went up over his head mechanically.

"Thet's ther stuff," remarked Kit, quietly. "Don't try ter pull er gun on me, Jim, 'cause I'm rather swift with ther trigger finger myself, an' I don't never wait fer no one else ter git ther drop on me."

"See hyar, you fellers," put in Abe Kimball, suddenly, "I want yer to git out o' this. I don't keer ter hev yer around. See? Good-night."

Kimball spoke in his usual calm tones, but his hand was on his pistol, and the three fellows to whom he spoke knew that he was not to be fooled with safely.

"Thet's all right, Abe. We ain't doin' nothin'. We wuz jist foolin' with this hyar boy. He's under my charge, an' I

guess I kin do what I like with me own. Old Roland Bland left him to me when he died, an' I love him like a son."

"Thet's why yer wuz tryin' ter git him ready fer er pine box, eh?" laughed Keno Kit. "Waal, some fellers hez queer ideas of what is ther duty of a guardian."

Brill scowled at the young man with the fair hair, but Kit's hand still held his revolver, and Jim had not forgotten that Kit was quick with his trigger finger.

For a moment Jim looked from one to the other; then he made a sign to Cock-eyed Sam and the Mexican, and the three men turned their backs to the group, and stole away into the woods. As they disappeared, the moonlight showed Jim Brill still with his hand in the air, and Sam and Pete sneaking after him in a decidedly dejected manner.

Before the others could proceed again into the house, the thud of horses' hoofs came faintly to them, and they knew that the three conspirators had left Devil's Canyon, temporarily, at least.

"Whoop!" cried a female voice, so close behind Keno Kit that he started. "Why did yer let em go? I'd hev swiped 'em once jist fer luck, ef I'd been you, Abe."

There was an open window, which had been closely shuttered when the fight had begun, but had been afterward thrown open, so that the owner of the voice could see all that was going on outside.

The crowd looked at her, but with no particular interest, and when Abe Kimball set the example of going inside, everybody followed him but Keno Kit and the boy Otis.

"What is it, Ruth?" asked the detective, with a smile that softened his stern face as if by magic.

"What air yer goin' ter do ter them rascals, Kit?"

"Do with 'em? Nothin'. What do yer mean?"

"Nothin'. Do yer mean thet, Kit?"

The girl's eyes fairly blazed in the moonlight, and Kit thought how pretty she looked when she was indignant. For it was a girl, not more than seventeen, who was hanging out of the window talking to Keno Kit.

She had a piquant face, with a bright color in her plump cheeks, and the dark hair that hung over her forehead was naturally wavy, giving her a singularly attractive appearance, in which refinement seemed to struggle with the disposition to freedom of manner consequent upon her rough surroundings.

"What 'ud yer hev us do with 'em?" asked Kit.

"Don't yer know ez they'll do you up, ef yer ever give 'em ther chance?" asked the girl.

"Mebbe."

"Mebbe? Wot d'yer mean by thet? Why, they've jist gone away ter thet place ez they hev in ther mountains, an' they'll hev it all fixed ter wipe yer out afore yer another day older. Mark my words, an' do wot yer like about it."

The shutters closed with a bang, and Keno glanced at the boy, with an amused expression.

"Thet gal beats all I ever met in ther whole course of my life," observed Keno. "But she's right in what she says, all ther same."

"Why should they care to kill you, Kit?" asked Otis, in a quiet tone, as he drew his gaze reluctantly from the shuttered window behind which the young girl had disappeared. "They want to get me out of the way, I know, because you have explained it. But I do not see why they should care to take the risk of killing a man so well known and so popular as Keno Kit."

Kit laughed as joyously as a boy as he waved his hand deprecatingly, and answered:

"Otis, I'm afraid you air givin' me what we call in ther East, taffy. Who says I'm popular?"

"You know it, Kit, and I am surprised

that you care to throw doubt upon a conceded fact. I do not think it is worthy of you—one of the bravest men in Arizona, with a Government commission in the Federal Secret Service in your pocket and a record of having disposed of more toughs than any one else in the West."

"I think I shall hev ter get you to read my record to ther Government, ef I ever want er boost in ther service," said Kit, with a laugh. "But, we cannot afford ter let these hyar fellers git ther best of us, an' I'm thinkin' they'll do it ef they git half er chance. Let's go inside."

Keno entered as he spoke, with the boy close behind him, but walking with a steady, dignified step, altogether different from the light, springy motion of the detective—for a detective Keno Kit turns out to be, as the reader sees.

As they entered the barroom, which extended the whole length of the building from back to front, Kit staggered before a resounding slap on the cheek that made him see stars. At the same moment the voice of Ruth rang out in disdain:

"See hyar, now, Kit, I don't want yer ter never speak ter me ag'in ef yer ain't no better man than yer hev showed yerself ter be ter-day. Ther idee of lettin' three crawling, liver-colored skunks like them git away from yer makes me so mad!"

Keno had recovered from the slap, and although his face still stung, he smiled, as he looked into the flushed countenance of the little virago, with the dark hair waving over the broad forehead, and making her as beautiful a creature as Kit had looked at for a long time.

"He couldn't help it, Ruth. Besides, you know Keno well enough to be sure that whatever he does is for the best. Did you ever know him to make a mistake?"

It was Otis who spoke, and his quiet remark was not without effect upon the impulsive girl.

"Thet's all right, ez far ez it goes, Otis. But, I didn't think thet Keno Kit 'ud ever let er Mexican and two white coyotes like them throw him down. It ain't in natur'. You know thet."

"Wait a while, Ruth, an' mebbe you'll change yer mind about me," said Kit, quietly. "I hev other business in these hyar parts, an' I can't afford ter run after any one 'less I know thet ther game will pay me fer me trouble. But don't you fear but what I'll be squar' with Jim Brill an' ther two fellers with him afore he's a week older!"

"If that's so you kin shake hands with me, Kit, an' I'm sorry I hit yer."

"Thet's nothin'," answered the detective, good-humoredly.

Kit walked to the table where Abe Kimball was again dealing the cards, as ccolly as ever, and whispered in his ear:

"The Black Oath Gang is all at work ag'in, Abe, an' I'm goin' ter smoke 'em out ter-night. Can't yer close ther game fer ther present?"

"It wouldn't do," whispered Abe, in return, without turning his head or stopping his nimble dealing of the cards. "Ther fellers around hyar 's suspicious already, on 'count o' you bein' yar."

"You don't think they are all in it, eh, Abe?"

"I don't s'pose they air all in it, 'cause counterfeitin' is er thing thet common men can't do. But I think they hev ther idee about what is goin' on, an' thet they are all ready ter fight fer ther real parties ag'in er Gov'ment detective, thet's all."

"Guess you'r right. But I want yer ter come with me ter-night, nevertheless."

Without answering, Abe made a sign all but invisible even to the sharp gaze of the detective, and the response came immediately in the shape of a ruddy-faced, innocent-looking little fellow, who was probably thirty years of age, although he might have been anything between fifteen and fifty.

"Here, Waxy, take ther cards," said Abe, briefly.

The ruddy-faced young man took the dealer's seat, and dealt the cards in the most business-like way, smiling all the time, and looking so innocent that it seemed a shame to have him in such a place at all.

Abe Kimball put on his coat and a soft, slouch hat, and he and Kit and Otis Garland left the house, without exchanging a word with each other or anybody else.

Hardly had they disappeared when a tall, red-nosed, sallow-faced man, in a rusty suit of black, and wearing a tall plug hat, started up from a corner of the room, and, without a word, slipped out quickly, to follow the three friends.

"Verily, what a queer thing it is that these smart fellows never think that some one else may be watching their game," observed the red-nosed man softly, to himself, as he arranged his old plug hat jauntily over his left eye. "Be it mine to smite them hip and thigh!"

CHAPTER IV. A PIT OF MYSTERY.

Perhaps the Arizona Detective saw the red-nosed man following them, in the darkness, but if he did, he made no sign.

"We'll hev ter git up in ther mountains right smart," he whispered to Kimball. "Them human coyotes know ez we're after them, an' they ain't allowing themselves ter be caught in no snap. Mind that, now."

"I hear yer," answered Abe Kimball, briefly.

Up through the canyon swiftly walked Keno, with Abe Kimball by his side, and the boy a few feet in advance. The Indian blood in the lad made him the best one of the party to go ahead as the guide, for his penetrating vision could see things unobserved by white men, however keen they might be.

Otis knew what the expedition was, and he was fully on the alert. But he did not make any sign. He had the dignity of the Indian, and he would have considered it very bad form to show that he was excited in any way over the matter in hand.

It was too dark for Kit to see anything either before or behind him, but occasionally he stopped and listened, to make sure that there was no one on their trail.

At last after an hour's walk, the canyon came to an end abruptly and the three men found themselves upon a kind of plateau, on the edge of a precipice, that a sudden gleam of moonlight, coming through a rift in the clouds, revealed almost at their feet.

Instinctively the detective and Abe Kimball drew back from the edge of the cliff, but Otis walked to the very edge, so that his feet actually overhung the chasm, and looked down into the darkness.

He could not see anything but blackness, but he was apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, for he smiled as he stepped back to his two companions.

"Well, Otis?"

"It is all right. They are there!"

"Then lead on."

The youth stepped carefully twenty paces back from the edge of the precipice, evidently counting the distance in accordance with some special knowledge.

Kit and Abe Kimball watched him closely, and the detective placed his hand on the bowie-knife at his belt.

"Come!" from Otis, softly, but distinctly, and the two men joined him as he stood immovably on a certain spot, where the grass grew luxuriantly, in contrast to the dried-up appearance of the ground all around him.

"There must not be any suspicion. So I must make up my mind to fool them," whispered the boy.

"It's your funeral," answered Kit, in the same guarded tone.

"Perhaps it may be," responded Otis, significantly.

The boy had been carrying his blanket, tied tightly and slung across his shoulders out of the way. Now he unfastened this blanket, and allowed one end to fall to the ground.

By the moon's light Kit and Abe could see the movements of the boy plainly.

"What air yer goin' ter do, Otis?" asked Kit.

The boy, without answer, took the blanket in his hands, and, with a deft movement, threw it over his head, so that it enveloped him from top to toe.

"He would pass for thet cussed 'Pache Bad Thunder," muttered Abe Kimball.

The boy threw up the blanket so that his face showed.

"I must look like Bad Thunder, or I shall be killed," he remarked, calmly.

He enveloped himself in his blanket again, and then, like a flash, *sunk through the earth, out of sight.*

"Now, what are we to do?" asked Abe, with a comical grin.

"Wait, I guess."

"That's cheerful. Suppose that boy is caught down there, what can we do to help him if we stay up hyar?"

"At ther same time, I don't think it would be wise to go down after him, till he gives ther signal."

"Mebbe you are right."

"I know I am," responded Keno Kit.

"It's a great idee, this hyar guttin' down into ther earth like this, ain't it?" observed Abe, as he dug his heel into the ground and caused a hollow sound, as if he had kicked a wooden door.

"Hist! Down!" and the detective, dropping at full length on the ground, dragged Kimball down with him.

Hardly had they done this when some one clapped a hand over Kit's mouth.

"Beware!" was whispered in his ear.

Kit turned quickly as he lay, but he could see nothing, save a shadow disappearing around a clump of trees a few yards away.

"What wuz that?" asked Abe.

"It wuz Ruth's voice, but, cuss me ef I ever see her! She wuz gone afore ther words wuz rightly out of her."

"Look out! Hyar's some one else!"

Keno looked in the direction Kimball had motioned with his head, and he chuckled inaudibly.

The tall plug hat could only belong to one person—the individual who had sneaked from the corner of the bar-room in the Golden Glory saloon, and followed them up the canyon. He had kept close behind the three, and was now sitting on a stump of a tree over to the right of them, the clump of trees behind which Ruth had retreated.

"It's Sile Sloper. Ther drunken old rascal! Wot's he up ter hyar, I wonder?"

"Oh, I don't suppose it's anything pertickler, 'cause he never does anything thet amounts ter anything," observed Abe, carelessly.

"Still, we don't want him watchin' us. We dunno but wot he mought be in with ther gang, yer know."

"Not likely."

"No, not likely, but it mought be," returned Keno Kit.

The detective sprang to his feet, and ran over to the stump on which Sloper had been sitting all doubled up, and Abe could see his crouching form as he made his way over to the spy, determined to give him a hearty kick for his presumption in following them to the mountain.

"Git out o' this," cried Kit, as he swung his hand around to knock off the old plug hat.

To his utter surprise, his hand brought up with a terrible bang against a limb of the tree, of which the stump remained and the plug hat was nowhere to be seen.

"Yer yaller-livered skunk! I'll break yer jaw fer this," cried the detective, raging over the pain in his hand from striking against the stump.

He swung himself around to carry out his threat, but only to start back with a howl of surprise.

"Wot's ther trouble?" asked Abe, as he came up.

"Thar's no one here!"

Kimball ran around to the other side of the broken tree trunk, but, surely enough, Silas Sloper had disappeared, and there was not a vestige of either the man or his plug hat, although they had both been there a moment before, and there was no apparent means for them to have got away.

"This is er new deal," observed the detective. "But I'm goin' ter git ter ther bottom of it."

"How's that ter be did, Keno?"

"By goin' down after thet thar boy, signal or no signal."

Kit ran to the clump of grass, and stooping, gave a gentle pull to a large ring hidden in the grass. The ring answered to the pull, and there was exposed to view a hole about two feet square, leading into black darkness.

"Come right after me, Abe!" said Kit, as he leaped into the hole and vanished.

Kimball followed, but evidently found a footing somewhere near the surface, for his head was above the level of the ground, and his hand fumbled for the inside of the trap, that had slid to one side, at the touch of the ring.

He had not obtained a firm hold on the ring, when some one tumbled on top of him, and a voice exclaimed: "Hold on, thar! I'm with yer. I'm Ruth Howard, an' I hev ez much right ter be down thar ez you hev."

Ruth had dropped into the hole, and was sitting with her feet dangling inside, looking down into Abe Kimball's face.

"You hev a lot of cheek!" grumbled Abe.

"That's all right. It's what I depend on ter make me way. I'd like ter know what 'ud be ther result of bein' without nerve in this hyar State of Arizony."

Abe laughed, but did not answer, save by action, in giving his hand to the girl, and assisting her to jump down into the hole, about which she did not seem to entertain any misgivings.

She went down, out of sight, and Abe gave another tug at the ring.

Again he was fooled, for before he could catch the ring firmly, he received a hearty, open-handed slap, that sent him down into the mysterious depths, as Silas Sloper, still with his plug hat worn rakishly on one side, jumped into the hole, and pulled the trap into place!

It was all done in the twinkling of an eye, and the thick tuft of grass waved over the place as if it had never been disturbed since the beginning of the world.

CHAPTER V.

THE VOICE OF THE DEAD.

When Otis dropped into the hole, he went down about ten feet vertically, and struck upon a heap of sand, that broke his fall, and prevented his being shaken unpleasantly.

It was pitch dark, but that did not disturb him. He knew it could not be anything else until an artificial illumination was brought upon the scene.

Like a man who knew his way, he turned to the right and walked swiftly along a passageway, with a certainty of step that indicated a knowledge of his surroundings. He put his hands out at intervals, to feel the rocky walls, and make sure that he didn't run into the wall, while his ears were strained to catch any sound that might arise in this mysterious retreat.

At last he was stopped by the passage coming to an end with a wall of rock facing him, just like those at the sides. It seemed as if he had walked into a pocket, with no possible means of egress.

"All right so far," he muttered. "Now I must go back and warn the others. If these men down here only knew that their prey was so near them, what a wolfish glee there would be. But they

don't. Otis Garland will turn the tables on them, as sure as they are born."

He walked swiftly the way he had come, deep in thought. If he had not been in a reverie, the chances are that his adventure down in this cavern would have had a different ending.

There was an opening in the side of the wall on the right as he walked from the foot of the well by which he had come down from the outer air, and which was now, as he retraced his steps, on the left.

He had passed this opening easily on his way in, but now, with his mind on something else, he turned into the opening unconsciously, and walked swiftly off at right angles to the passage along which he should have made his way to regain the bottom of the well, where he meant to give the signal to Abe Kimball and Keno Kit.

"Hello! What's that?" he muttered, as he caught the sound of whispering ahead of him.

With his Indian caution, he stopped and listened, with his head close to the wall, near the ground, and his heart beating like a trip hammer with the intensity of his attention.

After a minute's perfect stillness, during which the voices of Pete Morrelli, Jim Brill, and Cock-eyed Sam rose and fell with the earnestness of their conversation, Otis seemed to make up his mind as to his action, and, with a resolute shake of the head, he walked forward quickly in the direction of the voices.

Suddenly, without warning, the rays of the moon shown down upon him, and he found himself in the open air again.

"I'm in the front yard. I must have taken the wrong turning," he thought. "Well, I am glad of it. I am as good a man as any one of the three, and if I can prove that they are in this gang of counterfeiters it will be a good thing for the rest of the community, and will perhaps relieve me of a great deal of trouble. They mean to wipe me out if they can, and I do not see any possibility of protecting myself except by killing the three of them. I am not disposed to kill people for fun, but there are times in Arizona, when a little blood-letting is healthful, and I think this may be one of them."

He moved along, cautiously, with his blanket over his shoulder, ready to be thrown over his head when necessary.

He had just reached an opening that led to a platform hemmed in on all sides by the rocky walls, with trees growing from the crevices, when a cry from Pete Morrelli warned him that he was discovered.

He dropped flat behind a huge boulder, and wormed himself along toward a hollow stump of a tree that lay in his path. Into this he drew himself so swiftly that the Mexican did not see where he went, and, in the gloom, could not be sure that he had seen anything alive.

"What's ther matter, yer blamed Greaser?" he heard Cock-eyed Sam demand, angrily.

"Maledetto! Me zee ze boy!"

"Yer lie, yer thief!" growled Jim Brill, in a tone that betokened more or less intoxication.

Otis could not help actually laughing to himself as he heard this. He knew that his greatest hope of safety lay in the quarreling of the men, and he only hoped that they would snarl at each other, so that they would fall foul of everything and save him the trouble of cleaning them out.

"For I will clean them out, if I am obliged to. I don't mean to be killed for the sake of letting my dear uncle, Guy Bland, enjoy a fortune of \$20,000 in the shape of a life insurance payment on my account."

He did not know anything about the legacy of \$100,000 that would go to Guy Bland in case of his own death, but he knew that it would be to the advantage of that worthy if he were to die, and that the men near him would not

hesitate at any means of getting rid of him he had already had severe proof that evening, in the struggle outside the Golden Glory Saloon.

Otis worked himself along in the hollow trunk of the fallen tree, until he found a small opening through which he had a pretty good view of all the men seated about the ground—for they had made up their minds that Pete Morrelli had only supposed that he saw Otis, and they were quite easy in their fancied security, evidently.

To the surprise of the boy, he saw that there were four men in the party, although he had seen only three at first. The fourth man, who was dressed in the rough clothes of a miner, and looked about the same as his companions so far as outward appearance went, was in such a position that the boy could not see his face.

There were three horses, tied together by their bridles, a little way off, in the shadow of the trees that overhung the place, and the general aspect of things was that of comfortable retirement, without thought of the possibility of intrusion.

"Who is that fellow, I wonder?" muttered Otis, as he tried to distinguish the features of the fourth man, with his face turned away.

In his eagerness to see who the man was, Otis made a false move. He struggled along through the trunk of the tree, and before he knew it, his head and shoulders were out at the other end.

He realized his mistake as soon as the cool air told him that he was outside the hollow log. But he was too late.

With a hiss of fierce joy, Cock-eyed Sam sprung upon him, and dragged him out altogether.

"Waal, hyar's luck by ther barrel," exclaimed Sam.

"Maladetto! Ve have him now. Ah, ze money is ours," chuckled the Greaser.

Jim Brill did not say anything. He contented himself with seizing the lad from behind, and holding his two hands at his side, with a grip of iron, while Cock-eyed Sam held the prisoner in front, and grinned in his face malignantly.

"Whar's ther rest of yer gang, Otis, my boy?" inquired Brill, sarcastically. "Yer didn't come down alone, did yer?"

The boy did not answer. His Indian blood would not allow him to betray discomfiture, not even surprise at the way he had been caught, and he looked to be the most unconcerned member of the group.

Pete Morrelli drew his knife, and rushed forward, with a snarl, to bury it in the bosom of the young half-breed.

"Yer cussed Greaser! What air yer goin' ter do?" demanded Jim, as he released his hold of Otis' arms, and aimed a blow at the Mexican, which that worthy managed to dodge, however.

Morrelli started back, to keep out of reach of Brill's avenging hand, as he answered, sullenly:

"Ve not vant him alive, eh? Vhy not keel him now?"

Brill did not reply, and the Mexican sat down on the log, in sulky silence.

Sam was still holding the boy, who was not offering any resistance, but was content to bide his time. His dark eyes were the only things about him that moved, and they glanced swiftly from one of his enemies to another, as if he were calculating his chances of escape.

Brill saw these glances, and laughed hoarsely, as he said:

"Yer needn't try ter beat us this time, Otis. You're caught dead to rights. We'll jist hold yer down hyar till we air through with yer, an' I don't think you'll be troubled about things in this world any more."

The sinister meaning of these remarks could not be misunderstood, but the boy only fixed his gaze upon the speaker, without replying.

"Put er rope around him, Sam, while I hold him," continued Brill, to his companion, as he suited the action to the

word, and, stepping behind Otis, caught his arms again in his determined grip.

Sam produced a lariat from the saddle of one of the horses, and, with the dexterity born of long practice with the rope, took a couple of turns around the boy's body, and was about to tighten it, when, with a crash, a man's fist shot out from somewhere, and catching him on the point of the jaw, stretched him senseless at the side of the log.

Pete Morrelli, who had been sitting on the log, was overturned by a movement of the foot of the owner of the fist, and lay sprawling at the feet of Otis.

The boy, quick-witted and alert, who had perhaps seen the newcomer before, sprung away, easily slipping out of the loosely-coiled lariat, and disappeared.

"Cuss it! Who's this?" yelled Brill.

He sprung forward, but again that terrible fist came into play, and Brill was knocked backward upon the body of the Mexican.

It was for only a moment, however. With an oath, Brill, who was as active as a cat, was on his feet again, as his hand flew to his belt, for his pistol.

Then he uttered a howl of dismay that he could not control. *His pistol was gone!*

"Fooled again, Jim Brill!"

There was no mistaking that mocking tone! It was the voice of Keno Kit, and the detective was standing before Brill and the Mexican, smiling with his usual coolness!

"Cuss yer! Yer can't git out o' this! I hev ten men right hyar at my elbow! You've fooled yerself this time, Keno Kit!"

Brill hissed these words at the detective, as he stood waiting for the next move.

Kit laughed. "Thet's all right, Jim Brill, but it's you thet's fooled, fer I hev twenty men within call, an' I'll prove it to yer in a minute."

"Whar air they?" demanded Brill, contemptuously.

"Thar's one of them, right by yer side," answered the detective, as he pointed to a figure muffled in a blanket, standing at the left of the Mexican—a figure whose small stature convinced the ruffians that it was not Otis or anyone else that they could recognize.

"Who is it?" demanded Brill, involuntarily, keeping his eyes fixed on the detective's face, as if he were fascinated.

"The avenger!" came from the muffled figure, in tones that neither Jim Brill or Pete Morrelli remembered ever to have heard before.

"It's ther dead man, Roland Bland!" gasped Jim Brill, as the color left his swarthy face, leaving it a peculiar gray hue, that was suggestive of a corpse, rather than a living man.

"It is the voice of the dead, Jim Brill," whispered the detective, stretching forth both his hands.

CHAPTER VI.

A GHOSTLY VISITOR.

When Silas Sloper dropped to the heap of sand he found himself alone. Abe Kimball and Ruth had gone away, and as it was pitch dark, Silas could not see how far they had gone.

"Verily, methinks the maiden lacks in discretion, and as for the man of nimble fingers, he is a fool," muttered Silas Sloper, as he took off his old plug hat, and brushed it carefully with the sleeve of his threadbare coat, as well as he could in the dark.

He pulled himself together, and then, instead of following the narrow passageway, by which Otis had eventually found his way into that nest of human hornets, he felt carefully along the rocky wall at the side of the heap of sand, until his finger rested upon a small protuberance that would never have been noticed by a stranger, even if there had been light. It looked like a casual inequality in the rock that formed the wall, but was really an iron knob, that yielded under a good hard pressure of the hand.

"Verily, this is harsh and trying to the

hands," muttered Silas, "but the Philistines have not been able to find it, and to protect the sacred talents with which we are blessed, we must submit to trials and mortifications of the flesh. Ah, me!"

He sighed sanctimoniously, and, pressing his hand with all his force on the knob, it went in, and he proceeded to the next stage of the operation in which he was engaged.

This operation was nothing less than to force an entrance through the apparently solid wall. He placed his knee and hand firmly against the wall, and, now that the knob had been pressed in, releasing an inside bolt, the wall yielded to his strength, and a section of it, about two feet wide and five high, went in, and revealed an opening.

It was a heavy oaken door, ingeniously covered with a kind of cement, that had hardened till it was like rock itself. This cement had been painted to resemble the rock around it, and as it was so hard no one could tell that there was anything there in the nature of a secret door, particularly as it fitted so snugly that the crack where it swung open was absolutely invisible.

"Verily, the maiden and her protector, the man of battles, may wander through the hallways of the underground village, and naught shall disturb them so far as I am concerned. But I will e'en retire to my secret chamber, and there busy myself in the work that must be done. Lo, all things are ordered for the best."

With these philosophical reflections, Silas squeezed himself into the narrow opening, stooping and removing his precious plug hat as he did so, and closing the door after him.

As soon as the door was secured, Silas felt about the wall till he found a small lamp on a shelf. This he lighted in the dark, with the air of a man who was sure of himself. There was not much to be seen, for the place in which he found himself was only an empty chamber about eight feet square, with furnishing of no kind save a shelf along one of the walls, on which were two coal-oil lamps like that he held, with handles for convenience of carrying.

"Everything is quiet here, I perceive. The Philistines have not been able to penetrate to the secret chamber, and it is possible that their precious lives may be spared because they have not prospered in their scheme against the good ones of the earth. Ah, verily!"

Silas Sloper had a sanctimonious way of turning up his eyes and twitching his red-nose at the same instant, that gave him a most peculiar look, particularly with his old plug hat worn over his eye, in the rakish manner already described.

"It is meet that I should look into the riches of the tents of the workers. I will leave this outer portion of the temple of wealth, and examine the treasures beyond."

Thus saying he tapped on the wall opposite the doorway by which he had reached this small apartment, and listened for an answer. None came.

"Verily, it seemeth as if I am alone here. Be it mine to enter without witnesses."

He stooped to the floor, and there found an iron ring, attached to a rod that ran into the wall, and that was attached to a bolt inside. He pulled this ring, and heard a click inside that told him the fastenings of the hidden door had been partly removed.

But this was not all. It would not do to trust to a bolt that might be found by any inquisitive stranger. So Silas went to the other side of the room, and scraped away some of the sand that was carelessly scattered over the floor.

"We must overcome our enemies by strategy, but verily it goeth against the grain of the honest man," he muttered, as he fumbled in the sand till he found a soft spot in the rocky floor. Here he dug with his hands, and made a hole about six inches deep, at the bottom of which was an iron ring like that by

which he had already removed one bolt. He pulled the ring, and when he heard a click in the wall he knew that he had removed all the fastenings. So he replaced the earth and covered the place carelessly with the fine sand again, and went with his lamp to the rocky wall, which he pushed with his knee and hand, and forced an opening about the size and shape of that by which he had gained entrance to the room in which he stood.

But the next room was altogether different to that in which he had been standing. It was devoted to business, as could be seen by one hasty glance around it by the light of the lamp Silas carried.

"All quiet," he muttered, as he closed the door, which fastened automatically. "I guess I'll do a little work myself, although I prefer company, yea, verily."

He placed the lamp on a large table in the centre of the room, and then lighted two more lamps in sconces on the wall, and took up his position before a large mirror on the wall, where the light from the lamps on the wall fell full upon his face, and illuminated his red nose picturesquely.

"Alas! How vain is man! I know that I am fair to look upon, and lo, I am always tempted to gaze upon my beauty of feature, like unto a giddy maiden. Ah, me!"

Silas Sloper was perfectly serious in what he said. He believed that he really was handsome, and his sallow face and red nose, with the old plug hat worn carelessly on the side of his head, seemed to him to be elements of beauty that he feared would cause many a heartache to the fair ones of Arizona yet, if he revealed himself too freely.

He took off his hat, and gave it a careful brushing with the sleeve of his coat, till the hat and the sleeve shone as if they were greased. Then he deposited the hat carefully on a side table, and with a comb trimmed his lank black hair into curls at the sides of his face, and twisted his features into all kinds of shapes, to see how he looked with his hair thus arranged.

"Verily, it is meet that I should look my best at all times. Even when no man seeth me, I must not neglect the gifts of nature."

It was surprising that Silas Sloper could take so much care of his personal appearance, considering that he knew there were people in the cave whose presence boded no good to the gang of which he was a member if any more of its secrets were discovered. But Silas was satisfied that those secrets would not be discovered, because he had such perfect faith in the security afforded by the precautions taken, that he had no fear of even Keno Kit, clever detective as he knew him to be.

As the reader has seen, the secret was a good one, and unless some one were to show how the doors to the inmost chamber were to be opened, it might well be doubted whether any one could find his way in, even supposing he had reached the inside of the cave at all.

"I suppose Keno Kit, Abe Kimball, and that comely damsel, Ruth Howard, are moving about in the outer darkness. Ha, ha, ha!"

Silas laughed till he shook his plug hat off, and then he stopped as suddenly as he had begun, for he feared that the hat might be injured, and that would stop his mirth at any moment.

"Verily, such a hat as this could not easily be procured in Arizona, and it behooves me to care for it with exceeding solicitude. Ah, me!"

Silas had a way of ending many of his sentences with a sighing "Ah, me!" without meaning anything by it particularly. But it was generally a prelude to his going to work, and it was so in this instance.

The room in which he stood was a large apartment, fitted up as a workshop. There was a stove, a forge, a quantity of metal of white and yellow, in irregu-

lar masses, as if it had been melted down from various articles, and three tables. Two of these tables have already been mentioned. The third was against the wall, with the two lamps in sconces on either side of it, where their light would fall full upon it. In addition to these lamps were two on the table, of the kind known as "student lamps," that gave forth a clear white light of great penetration, with shades, that threw their reflection upon the table, where there were several steel plates, highly polished, and which on close inspection, were seen to be beautifully engraved.

"Ah, verily, it seemeth that the work proceeds apace. These are as good as any Uncle Sam could make, and I think I shall have to take a trip East soon, to give the good people the benefit of the labors that we have done. It seems almost a shame to let such splendid work go away among the Philistines and savages. Ah, me!"

Silas kept his plug hat on his head, but removed his long coat, and rolled up the sleeves of his ragged shirt. Then he lighted a fire in the stove, and soon had a crucible on the fire, with a quantity of yellow metal in it. He busied himself about the room, looking at the molds that had been prepared, and in due time began to make twenty-dollar gold-pieces.

"These are not very good," he muttered, "but I think they will pass among the tenderfeet in Chicago and St. Louis."

For half an hour Silas worked silently at his rascally task, apparently not the least concerned because there were strangers in the cave. The fact was that he did not fear their penetrating to the part of the secret domain in which he was at work, and he felt that it was not his business what was done in the outer corridors or chambers.

"I doubt whether Abe Kimball will ever leave the crib alive. But I don't want to be mixed up in it. I am a man of peace. Ah, me!"

He bent over the stove, and was absorbed in watching the metal bubbling and hissing, as it became liquid, and ready to be poured into the molds. He looked up to get the molds that lay near him, and to take a ladleful of metal, when he stopped, with an expression of deadly fear in his eyes.

Standing, stiff and silent, on the other side of the stove, where the light of the lamps did not reach it, thus leaving it in deep shadow, was a figure, shapeless and inscrutable.

Silas was a cool, self-possessed man, as a rule, but now his jaw dropped, and there was an awful horror on his sallow countenance, that seemed to make his nose glow with a brighter red than usual.

The figure was muffled from top to toe in a blanket such as is used by Indians, revealing the leggings and moccasins of an Indian below the edge of the blanket.

"Wha—what are you?" faltered Silas, huskily.

There was no reply, but the figure strode one step nearer to the trembling Silas.

Silas raised the ladle in his hand, threateningly, but his arm seemed to have lost its power, for his hand dropped nervelessly to his side at once.

"Who—who are you?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"The avenger!" answered the figure, still in a muffled tone.

"Roland Bland!" shrieked Silas. "I knew it! I knew it! I was sure that he would never rest in his grave after that murder!"

As he spoke he fell flat to the floor, burying his head in his arms, and utterly disregarding the fact that his precious plug hat had rolled away, amid the sand and rubbish that cumbered the floor.

How long Silas lay on the floor he did not know. He found himself there, after a while, without knowing how he had got there, until, with a whirl, the remembrance of that awful figure in its blanket, came back to him, and he shuddered

as he buried his face again in his arms and moaned aloud.

Gradually, as he heard nothing, he mustered courage to peep from his seclusion, and look around the room. Then he heaved a sigh of relief!

The mysterious figure had disappeared!

For a few minutes longer Silas Sloper lay on the floor, among the sand, trying to get up his courage sufficiently to rise to his feet.

He did so at last, and then, as he saw that he was alone, his first thought was for his plug hat.

"Verily, my raiment is much disarranged," he muttered, "and my hat is not so well disposed as I could wish. Ah, me!"

He picked up the precious hat and brushed it with the greatest solicitude with a soft brush that he produced from a small cupboard against the wall, near the stove.

"Not much hurt, but it might have been," he observed. "Pshaw! What a fool I am. I must not drink so much. I am always thinking I see something that I don't see. I get drunken with much wine, and then I lose the great intellect with which I have been endowed. Ah, me! Verily, the Philistines would rejoice at my downfall, and it must not be."

He looked at the crucible, and, to his astonishment, saw that the metal had become solid, and that the fire in the stove had gone out.

"I must have been here some time," he muttered. "It was a kind of fit, I suppose. Well, I will not drink any more wine. Ah, me!"

There seemed to be a regret that he was to lose so much pleasure, in the sigh that came from the depths of his soul.

He busied himself in preparations to light the fire again, and then he stopped, as if he had been stricken with paralysis.

In the middle of the room, with a shadow over him that seemed to Silas to be supernatural, was the muffled figure, pointing toward him, with an arm that was at least twice as long as that of an ordinary man!

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK OATH VENGEANCE.

When the Arizona Detective stretched forth his hands and made his declaration that the muffled figure was that of Roland Bland, the dead brother of Guy, it seemed to actually paralyze the two ruffians who faced him.

For at least a minute they stood still, with their gaze fixed upon the face of the detective.

At last Brill muttered: "You air er smart man, Keno Kit, but yer can't give me no sich jolly ez thet. I don't believe ez ther dead kin come back ter life, and I know Roland Bland is er goner, 'cause I—"

"What?" asked Kit, quickly, as the other hesitated.

"None o' yer bizness!"

"Oh, yes, it is some o' my business, Jim Brill. You killed Roland Bland, as I very well know. That is ther reason he comes back ter haunt yer. Fer ther dead *do* come back ter life sometimes, when thar is any occasion fer it, an' this hyar is one o' them identical occasions."

With a howl of rage Jim Brill sprang upon Keno Kit, and bore him backward. Before the detective could recover himself, Pete Morrelli was upon him, too, and the two men held him down by sheer weight.

For a few moments the three contestants turned over and over in fierce struggle, while the still form of Cock-eyed Sam seemed to be a mockery of the struggles of the living to overcome each other.

The detective had been taken so suddenly that he could neither draw a weapon nor meet his antagonists with any chance of repelling them.

The breathing of the three came quick and hard, and in a little while they stopped struggling, although all main-

tained their hold wherever it happened to be. Jim Brill had the detective by the collar of his shirt—for, fortunately for Kit, he had missed his throat when he sprang upon him. Pete Morrelli had the two arms of the detective in his grasp, and was afraid to release them to draw his knife, as he would have liked.

Kit had seized one of the Mexican's arms, and with his other hand was holding back Jim Brill.

They ceased their fierce struggle, from very exhaustion, but each was watching that his antagonist did not take a sudden advantage.

"Now, we hev yer, Kit, an' I don't think you'll be troublin' Arizony any more."

Jim Brill hissed this through his set teeth with a deadly hate that spoke volumes to the detective.

Kit laughed contemptuously.

"Why, yer blamed coyote! W'ot kin yer do? You dasn't let go uv me, an' you can't do nothin' with yer hands this hyar way. Why, I'll hang ther whole Black Oath Gang afore I'm a month older! You hear w'ot I say!"

"Yes, I hear yer, an' it's jist like ther bluff yer allers gives, when yer can't do nothin'. Ther Black Oath Gang is too much fer yer, Keno Kit. It hez pow'ful friends in Chicago, Frisco, New York, an' even in London, England. Don't you worry yerself 'bout ther Black Oath Gang. We kin take keer of ourselves."

Brill tightened his hold on Keno Kit's shirt, and the three men were again rolling over each other in deadly conflict.

Cock-eyed Sam had been lying perfectly still, as if he were dead, but now, as the three rolled over him, the Mexican happened to dig his elbow into Sam's face, and the shock seemed to bring him to his senses.

He moved, breathed heavily, and then, with an effort, arose to a sitting posture, watching the fight with a sort of stupid interest, as if he did not quite understand his own position or his surroundings—which was indeed the case.

The three were too busy to notice Sam. The detective had managed to tear himself loose from the grasp of Brill, and was trying to loosen the hold of the Mexican.

"Look out, Pete! He's gitting away, an' you know w'ot it'll mean if he does it!" panted Jim, as he tried in vain to fasten his clutch on the detective in some other place.

The Mexican did not answer. He had all the occupation with the detective that he wanted, and was not disposed to waste any strength in mere words. But he knew what it would mean if Keno Kit once got the upper hand, although he did not say so.

As for the detective, there was a twinkle in his eye, as he heard this warning from Jim, and he fought all the harder with the Mexican to prove that Brill had not understated the danger to the Black Oath Gang if he should win this fight.

Cock-eyed Sam was regaining his senses, and at this instant he realized that it would be well for him to take a hand, if he wanted to save the whole gang from destruction.

He stood up and stretched himself, like a man awaking from a long sleep. Then he threw himself upon the detective just as Kit had broken away from the Mexican, and was preparing to drive his fist into Jim Brill's face.

The weight of Cock-eyed Sam's assault was too much for Kit, and the next moment he was flat upon the ground, his three foes on top of him.

In the twinkling of an eye the lariat that had been thrown around Otis, and out of which he had slipped before he ran away, was tied around the detective and twisted about his body until he was no more able to move than if he had been an Egyptian mummy.

"Now go through his pockets," commanded Cock-eyed Sam.

"You do it, Pete," added Jim Brill.

There was a malignant grin on his face as he gave this order, for he knew that if anything could make the detective feel humiliated, it would be to have the Greaser going through his pockets and defying him as he lay there helpless.

Nothing loth, the Mexican dropped on his knees by the side of Kit, and pulled out the bowie-knife which the detective wore at his side. Then he took his six-shooters, and pointed to the fact that the six chambers in each weapon were loaded.

"Ze nice leetle boy would like to keel us, eh?" he squeaked, as he turned over the weapons to Brill.

Then he gave the detective a slap in the face that made the blood leap to the cheek of Keno Kit, and set his eyes blazing in anger and indignation.

There was something in the eyes of the detective that made the Mexican wish for the moment that he had not dealt the blow, but he cast it off with a sneer, and looked to Brill for further directions.

"Take him ter ther cell!" ordered Jim. "We must make a example of him fer ther benefit of ther other Gov'ment smart alecks ez thinks they kin bluff ther Black Oath Gang."

"Who is ter benefit by ther example?" asked Kit, whose curiosity was as keen as if he had not been in such a predicament.

"I'll tell yer, Kit, me boy. I wouldn't say nothin' ter yer if yer wuz ever goin' out o' this hyar place. But, ez it is, we hev yer safe, an' I don't mind givin' yer er lot of information ez might be useful ter yer if yer wuz ever goin' ter be in er position ter use it!"

"I wouldn't talk too much if I wuz you, Jim," broke in Sam. "Supposin' he wuz ter git out, whar would we be if he hed er lot o' ther secrets o' ther gang?"

"Who's ther captain o' ther Black Oath Gang, Sam? Thet's w'ot I want ter know," demanded Brill, threateningly.

Sam waved his hand with a conciliatory gesture, as he said:

"Wal, you air ther captain, o' course, Jim, an' you hez er right ter do w'ot yer like, I s'pose. But I wuz on'y reminding yer thet this hyar Keno Kit hez er great repitation fer gettin' out o' all kinds o' scrapes w'en he seems ter be caught dead ter rights, an' I don't think it's doin' ther squar' thing by ther rest o' ther boys ter give things away. Thet's all I hev ter say."

Bang!

Jim Brill had drawn his pistol and shot Cock-eyed Sam through the head!

It was all done so quickly that, before the Mexican or Keno Kit realized what had happened, Sam's body was lying motionless on the ground, and Jim Brill was coolly throwing out the used cartridge and placing another one in his revolver.

"You infernal rascal! I wish I wuz out o' these ropes fer just a minute, an' I'd thrash yer with my fists first, and blow yer brains out afterward," exclaimed the irate Kit.

The detective's anger was expressed in his flashing eyes, and Brill could but rejoice that he had Keno Kit so under bonds that the Arizona man-hunter could not do anything more than talk.

"Take thet away, and throw it over ther cliff inter ther gulch!" commanded Brill, looking at Pete Morrelli. "Ther buzzards an' coyotes will hev it all cleared away inside o' twelve hours. It's er good thing we don't hev ter keep no graveyard around hyar. It saves er lot o' work ter hev birds an' animals ter git away with yer corpses."

Morrelli was evidently in deadly awe of the man who had taken such summary vengeance on his companion for flouting his authority, and he seized the corpse by the collar and dragged him out of sight on the instant.

"Empty his pockets first," commanded Jim Brill.

The Mexican stooped and removed the

knife and pistols from the belt, and took out the cartridges. Then he searched his pockets, and brought forth a bag of gold dust, and some gold pieces, which he handed to Brill in silence.

"He hed too much wealth, anyhow, fer sich er skunk ez he wuz," remarked Jim, with a laugh. "Besides, I didn't trust him, an' I don't want no man in ther Black Oath Gang w'ot doesn't do jist ez he's told. You hear wo't I say, Pete, I hope."

Pete did not answer in words, but dragged the body of Sam from the log near which he had been lying, and around the corner of a sharp bluff a few yards away.

A moment later the detective heard a dull shock, which he knew was the sound of Sam's body striking the rocks far below, ere it dropped into the bottom of the gulch.

The whole scene was indescribably horrible to any one who was a stranger to the quick vengeance of such a gang as this whose sign was the "Black Oath," and Keno Kit made a vow to himself, at that moment, that contained no mercy for Jim Brill if the present condition of things should ever be reversed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HEART OF A SECRET.

The Mexican returned quietly, and, in answer to the inquiring look of Jim Brill, muttered:

"He's gone!"

"Good. Now help me git this hyar feller to ther cell."

The Mexican seized Kit by the shoulders, and Jim Brill took him by the feet. The detective was helpless, so the two men carried him along, but he kept his eyes open, and noted carefully the way he was taken.

He had entered the rock-bound space in which he found himself by the same way that Otis had come, and which is familiar to the reader. Somewhat to his surprise, the two ruffians carried him now in just the opposite direction.

"Just what I suspected," he thought. "There's another way out o' this little pocket. Wal, it's jist ez good thet I should know, an' when I git out o' this scrape, an' come back at these hyenas, I'll know how ter set about ther job."

"Whar air yer takin' me?" he asked, as the two carried him around the ledge of rock which was on the extreme edge of the precipice, and which the detective understood, almost by instinct, could be cut off from this part of the place by rolling a great rock into the pathway.

"Wait, an' you'll see," growled Brill. "An' don't ask no more questions, or I'll belt yer over ther head with my gun."

They put Kit down, none too gently as soon as they had passed this corner; and then the two, with a great deal of labor, pushed and pried a piece of rock, that must have weighed at least a ton into position, so that the narrow pathway was completely blocked. There was a gentle incline at the spot, which assisted them, or they could hardly have done it without assistance.

"Artful cusses!" muttered Kit. "It's er blamed sight easier ter put ther rock thar than to move it erway."

That done, they carried Kit to an iron door let into the rock. On this door Jim Brill hammered with the butt of his revolver.

Quickly the door opened, apparently of its own volition, and Kit saw that there was a passageway like that by which he had found his way to the heart of the Black Oath Gang's retreat.

A walk of about twenty yards, and then came another iron door, which opened in the same mysterious way, and closed after them, as the first one had done.

They were then in a large room, furnished comfortably, with rugs on the rocky floor; pictures hung around the wall, and oak chairs and tables of handsome design furnished the apartment.

The chairs were upholstered in leather, and there were several rockers of the same style, which seemed to invite one to lounge in them.

A large sideboard, with a mirror at the back, and with bottles and glasses in view, indicated that the Gang had not overlooked the means of conviviality, and a banjo and guitar that lay on a side table gave token that there was music in this extraordinary place sometimes.

All this Keno noticed as Brill and the Mexican dropped him to the floor, while Jim went to the sideboard and helped himself to some liquor, which he drank from a bottle, without taking the trouble to use one of the dozen glasses there.

"Ah! Thet's good! Pete, you may hev some, if yer like, though I don't know ez you're 'arned any, fer you air ther biggest fool, I think, ez we hev in ther Gang."

The Mexican made no reply to this courteous speech. He was used to abuse, and it did not affect him. But he availed himself promptly of the permission to drink. He poured out a fair quantity of the liquor into a tumbler and drank it off with a smack of the lips.

Brill had seated himself in one of the rockers, as if tired of his night's work, for it was a good many hours since he had been lying in wait for Otis, down by the saloon, and it would soon be daylight outside, although nothing could be seen of it down in this place, where the coal-oil lamps on the wall were the only means of illumination.

Pete Morrelli stood by the sideboard, waiting till it should please his chief to give him another order, and the detective had plenty of time to take an inventory of the room and its contents.

One object that soon caught his attention, almost to the exclusion of everything else, was a large frame on the wall near him, in which were a number of photographs.

"Thet's our Rogue's Gallery," observed Brill, with a laugh, as he saw what Kit was looking at. "You keep one at Washington an' other places, an' thar ain't no reason ez I know of why ther Black Oath shouldn't hev one, too. Is thar?"

The detective did not answer, and Brill, lighting a cigar which the Mexican had brought him, in response to a sign, puffed away contentedly, while Kit studied the photographs.

They were portraits of all the government detectives that had been in the West, with a number of others of officers in Washington in the employ of the government.

"Do yer see yer own mug thar, Kit? It's thar!" averred Brill, between his puffs at the cigar. "Oh, we hev yer! We got yer with a snap shot at different times, an' thar ain't er crook ez ever comes down hyar thet doesn't know jist how yer look."

Kit did not reply and there was silence for fifteen minutes, while Brill smoked his cigar and Pete Morrelli derived comfort from his cigarettes.

"Now, take him up, Pete," said Brill, at last.

The Mexican again seized Keno Kit's shoulders and Jim again took his feet. A door at the other end of the chamber had been partly open. This door Brill opened wide, with a kick, and they conveyed the helpless Kit into a narrow passageway that reminded the detective of the corridor of a jail, for there were three iron-grated doors in a row. Two were closed, but the first one to which they came was open.

The two threw him into the cell to which this door belonged, and before he realized what was to happen they had returned to the large room, banging the door behind them and leaving the detective in pitch darkness.

"Wal, they've left me alone. Thet's one comfort," muttered Kit, as he strained mechanically at his bonds.

He soon made up his mind that he would be able to loosen the lariat if

he was allowed to remain undisturbed, and he decided that that was the first thing to be done. Afterward, he would have to act as circumstances dictated.

Notwithstanding that he was in such a bad fix, Kit's thoughts were how to bring to justice the members of the Black Oath Gang, and how to save the life of Otis, the young half-breed.

"They mean ter kill thet boy, and they'll do it without waste of time, ef I don't stop 'em. Whar kin he be? Then, thar's Abe Kimball jumping around hyar somewhar, an' thet little gal, Ruth Howard. It's er purty bad mix, whichever way yer look at it!"

It was indeed a "bad mix."

In the mean time Jim Brill had returned to his comfortable rocker and lighted a fresh cigar.

"Now, look hyar, Pete," he observed, as he enjoyed the fragrance of his Havana, "thet boy hez ter be rubbed out, an' right quick, too. Thar's only three of us ter git thet insurance money now. Cock-eyed Sam wuz ter hev been in it. But he's met with a accident."

The Mexican grinned at this sally, and Brill puffed a little harder at his cigar to prevent himself from smiling at his own humor and thereby compromising his dignity in the eyes of the Mexican.

"Hev yer got ther boy safe?" he demanded.

"He's in Number Two. I saw him when ve took in Keno Kit."

"Whar's ther boss? You know he's down hyar somewhar, I suppose?"

"Yes. But I did not know where," answered the Mexican.

"Find him and report."

"I go," answered Pete, submissively.

"You needn't. I'm here!" and, as Brill turned, he saw Guy Bland, in the rough dress of a miner, but with his mustache waxed to a point, as usual, standing with his back to the photograph frame, regarding him with his usual smile.

"How did you come in?" demanded Brill, with some asperity.

"It doesn't matter how I came in, my dear Mr. Brill. Here I am. I saw your little controversy with the boy Otis, and I felt it necessary to take a hand in the game. So I led him here and locked him up. It was rather troublesome, because I could not allow him to see my face, and I do not like to wear a handkerchief over my countenance for any length of time. Besides, he tried to snatch it away once or twice, and I had to use force to prevent it."

Rough as were the two villains he was talking to, neither of them presented the devilish malignity that shone in the face of this man, with his white forehead and his dark eyebrows shading his piercing eyes.

They knew what he meant by "force," and Brill asked:

"Did you rub him out?"

"My dear Mr. Brill, why will you be so coarse. Do you mean, did I kill the young man? I certainly did not. I have nothing to do with killing him. If he is to be killed, there are other people to perform that unpleasant operation—people who have contracted to remove a certain boy, and I suppose they mean to carry out their contract."

"I guess ther contract will be carried out. At ther same time, Mr. Bland, I don't know whether you kin expect to be let off from all 'sponsibility when you come down hyar an' interfere," rejoined Jim, in a sulky tone.

"I believe I have a right to interfere," retorted Bland, with an ugly grin that Brill knew meant mischief. "I have a contract with you, and I expect you to carry it out. When you don't do it promptly, I come down to see what is the matter. I have enough information in my possession to hang a dozen or two of you fellows, and I might be tempted to use it if you don't behave yourselves."

The tones in which this was said were smooth and silky, and no one would

have supposed from merely looking at the speaker that he was uttering anything but courteous commonplaces.

Jim Brill was about to reply, when suddenly a door behind Bland burst open, and a man with a sallow face, a red nose, and wearing an old plug hat, tumbled into the room, quaking with fear.

"Hello, Silas, my good fellow, what is the matter?" asked Guy Bland, calmly.

"I've seen him!" gasped Silas.

"Seen who?"

"Give—give me some whisky. I can't speak."

Pete Morrelli poured out some liquor into a tumbler, and Silas drank it with feverish haste.

"Now, Silas, will you have the goodness to explain?"

Silas Sloper looked from one to the other, and then, in sepulchral accents, whispered:

"I have seen him—seen him twice, and he's right behind me, at the other side of that door."

"Who, you sniveling jackanapes?" demanded Guy Bland, angrily, but without raising his voice.

At this moment the door swung wide open, and there, standing in the opening, was the muffled figure, with the long, gaunt arm extended, as there came from the recesses of the blanket that covered the face—if it had a face:

"I am Roland Bland, your brother, that you murdered!"

With a shriek, the hardened Guy Bland fell senseless at the feet of his three companions, while Silas Sloper covered his face with horror.

CHAPTER IX.

CELL NUMBER TWO.

We left the detective in darkness in the cell to which he had been conducted, and where he was struggling to loosen the rope that bound him and rendered him helpless.

As has been said, he did not despair of getting out of the rope if he were left alone, and he did not cease his efforts to loosen the cords as soon as his captors had disappeared.

"It's no fool of er job, either," he muttered, when he had been tugging away for nearly ten minutes without any particular results. "These hyar ropes air made ter hold er cow, an', of course, I ain't no ways surprised ez they does erbout ther same thing with er man."

"But I know this hyar cussed thing can be got off if I keep at it," muttered Kit. "In fact, it's got ter come. I ain't goin' ter be wiped out jist fer ther sake of a rope ez don't want ter yield. I ain't thet kind o' man."

Kit pulled harder than ever, and, although the cord sunk into his flesh so that he suffered exquisite pain, in other parts he found that it was loosening and almost ready to hang in loops, and he cared little for the pain.

He had been working at it for ten minutes, and stopped to rest a little while, with the perspiration pouring down his face, when he noticed a slight noise behind him, like a mouse scratching his way through a board.

"Thar ain't no mice here, thet I'll sw'ar," he said to himself, as he resumed his tug at the lariat.

Again the scratching—this time so pronounced that the detective could not ignore it.

"Now what does thet thar mean?" he muttered. "Noises like thet don't come fer nothin', an' I think ez I ought ter pay some attention to a racket thet may mean good or bad fer me. It may be some trick of this hyar or'nary cusses ter scare me, or it may be ther signal of er friend."

The scratching continued, and the detective worked himself over to the wall by the simple process of rolling over the floor, bound as he was, and with no power to use any other means of locomotion.

He jammed himself tightly against the

wall, and the scratching seemed to be just at his ear. It was like the sound of a knife cutting through some hard substance.

Suddenly the detective uttered an involuntary cry of pain and rolled away from the wall.

"What's ther matter in thar?" called the surly voice of Jim Brill, as that worthy appeared at the grated door and looked through at Kit.

Kit did not answer, and, after standing at the door for a moment to make sure that the detective was really in the cell, Brill moved away and returned to the principal room, where he could rest himself in his comfortable rocker again.

No sooner had Brill disappeared than Kit moved back to the wall, but with his face to it this time.

The scratching had stopped while Brill stood at the door, but it was working away merrily now, as if relieved at the retreat of Jim Brill.

"Kit!"

Keno Kit heard his name pronounced in a muffled tone from somewhere, and the scratching stopped, seemingly that he might distinguish it.

"Hello!" he responded.

"Feel along ther wall, near ther bottom."

Keno Kit managed to get himself in such a position that he could pass his hand along the rocky surface, as directed, and soon he cried out in pain again.

A burst of silvery laughter, but guarded in its volume, came to his ears, and the scratching went on more vigorously than ever.

"Wal, ef she ain't er dandy!" said Keno Kit to himself. "By ther hokey, I'll fool this hyar gang yet, sure ez I'm Keno Kit."

He actually laughed, but inaudibly, as he thus thought, and again he put his hand to the part of the wall where he had encountered something that made him cry out with pain, and which was, in fact, a sharp point, like that of a knife.

"What shall I do now?" he asked, softly.

"Pull."

"How? My hands are tied."

"Thet's so. Wal, put yer arm against ther point of ther knife, so that I kin git at ther cord. Then move yer arm around so thet ther cord will be cut through."

The voice was that of Ruth Howard, as doubtless the reader has surmised already. Where she was, Keno Kit did not know. But the girl was so familiar with the crib of the Black Oath Gang that she could find her way to all kinds of holes and corners, and was likely to turn up anywhere, at any moment.

Kit did as she directed, and, with a great deal of trouble and much puffing, managed to rest the cord against the point of the knife, that had come several inches through the wall by this time.

With a quick movement, he forced the cord up and down against the edge of the knife, and the cord dropped from him to the floor in coils.

The first use he made of his freedom was to rush to the iron door and try to open it.

"No go!" he thought. "It wasn't likely they would trust me in hyar behind er door thet wasn't fastened. But ez I've got out of my rope, I don't think it will take me long to make my way out of the cell. Ther Black Oath Gang ain't got ernough ginger in 'em ter hold Keno Kit whar he don't want ter be!"

"Kit!"

"By Jove, I almost fergot ther little gal! What er blundering idiot I am."

He ran over to the wall, and saw that the hole through which the point of the knife had been thrust was much larger now, and when he seized the point of the knife and pulled, it came through into his hand.

A chuckle of triumph rose to Keno Kit's lips, but he restrained it in time.

The knife was a good-sized bowie, and the detective felt that he would be the equal of any two of the Black Oath Gang that might array themselves against him, now that he had such a serviceable weapon in his clutch.

Stooping down to the hole made by the knife, he whispered: "Ruth!"

"Wal?"

"Air yer thar?"

"Don't be er fool, Kit. How could I be talkin' to yer through this hole if I wasn't hyar? But what I want you ter do is ter do up this hyar gang. Ain't thet what you air hyar fer?"

"Yes, thet wuz ther intention. But I seem ter hev slipped er cog in ther performance, somehow. Instead of gittin' ther gang, ther gang hez got me."

"Wait."

"What's thet?"

The detective listened, but there was no response, and the detective did not know what was to take place next. Evidently the girl had gone, and equally certain was it that she had some plan for his release, and the furtherance of his campaign against the Black Oath Gang.

For five minutes Keno Kit stood still, thinking and waiting. Then he began to act.

"I'm thinkin' ez mebbe I kin open thet door now. At least, I'll try," he muttered.

He attacked the lock of the door with the point of his bowie knife, and was astonished to find that the lock was so common a one that it yielded almost immediately, and the next moment the door swung open, and he was in the corridor, looking at the half-open door that led to the big room where he left Jim Brill and his companion.

It was dark in the corridor, and the detective was in doubt what to do next, when suddenly his hands were seized behind and held down to his sides, evidently by two persons, since there were two hands on each arm.

He struggled, but could neither shake off the hands nor turn around.

"What—" he began, in a low tone, for he did not want to bring Jim Brill and the Mexican from the other room.

"Hush!" interrupted a silvery voice, that he recognized as belonging to Ruth Howard, and at the same moment Abe Kimball and Ruth stood before him, each with a smile on their countenances.

"Yer thought we couldn't find yer, I s'pose," said Ruth, laughing. "But you kin bet we've kept an eye on yer. As fer me, I know every inch of this hyar place. Ther Black Oath fellers think I'm all right. Thet is, they think I wouldn't peach, 'cause my father belonged ter ther gang, afore he wuz shot down in his tracks by er marshal, an' on thet account ther gang would trust me with more of their secrets than they would most people. So, with what they've told me, an' what I've found out fer myself, you bet I'm right in it. But I'm goin' ter show 'em now thet I don't stand in with no dirty counterfeiters, if my father did."

"Wal, now thet you're hyar, I s'pose you air goin' ter see me through with this hyar biz. The fust thing is ter git Otis Garland out'n this hyar cell. He's in No. 2, I heerd them fellers say."

"What?" gasped Ruth, with more real concern in her tone than the detective had heard since he had been in this cavern and listening to the voice of the brave little girl.

"I said he is in Cell Number Two."

"Then we hev ter hump ourselves ef we're goin' ter save him," answered Ruth, "for I've never known any one in Cell Number Two to come out alive. It's certain death when ther Gang puts any one in thar!"

"Oh, don't worry yerself, Ruth. It ain't gon' ter be sartin death in this case, 'cause ther cell is right hyar, an' we'll bring him out now. Ther lock on my cell wuz so slight I picked it with ther bowie, an' I reckon ther other one ain't any better."

As Kit spoke he stepped to the cell next to his own, which he knew was the place in which they had put Otis, because he had seen Pete Morrelli look in there.

It was very dark in Cell Number Two—much darker than in that in which he had spent a short time, and he wondered somewhat at the fact.

As he had said, the lock proved to be an easy one, and he picked it with the point of his knife with very little trouble, Abe Kimball standing in front of him, with his revolver in his hand, ready to shoot down any one that might come from the big room.

"Thar you air, Ruth. It didn't take me long to break down thet thar lock," observed Kit, cheerfully, as he swung the door open.

Ruth was holding him tightly by the arm, and, as has been intimated, she had a good strong clutch of her own when she chose to exert herself.

"Let go, Ruth. I want ter git ther boy out. Otis! Otis!"

"He can't hear yer," said Ruth, solemnly.

"Why, he's right hyar."

"No. You air mistaken. Otis Garland is nowhere within sound of your voice."

"Eh?"

Keno Kit turned round to look into the face of the girl by the narrow shaft of light that streamed in from the large room, for there was an awful terror in her tone that he could not help noticing.

"When a prisoner is placed in Cell Number Two he drops clear out of the world, and only a miracle can bring him back from the pit of death!" murmured the girl, solemnly.

"Wal, I'm ther miracle," declared Keno Kit, sternly.

He went to make a step forward as he spoke, but the girl dragged him back with such force that he almost fell over her, as she whispered in his ear:

"One step, and you would go down a hundred feet into a grave that would never yield up its dead."

"Ther gal is tellin' yer ther truth, Kit," put in Abe, in the same low tones that all employed. "There is a hole just inside that cell door, and Ruth stopped you only just in time."

"Do yer mean ter say thet they threw thet boy down thar, and thet he is smashed all ter pieces at ther bottom?" asked the detective, in horror.

"No. They wouldn't do thet. It isn't their way," answered the girl. "They let him down easily by a rope ladder, I guess. But he can't get up till they choose ter take him up, an' ez I tell yer, they never let any one come out o' thet thar place alive."

"Whar's ther ladder?" eagerly inquired Kit.

"They have it in ther one place thet I don't know in ther crib. Thar is some place hyar whar they make their coin, but I've never been thar. They kept thet from me always, when my dad wuz alive, an' it's thar they keep ther ladder an' other things thet they know must be at hand fer them if they ever git routed out of hyar."

"An' they'll be routed out right now," declared Kit. "Follow me! I won't stand any more of this hyar cussed foolin'. We are three, fer you air ez good ez er man in er muss, Ruth. We kin git erway with thar Greaser and Jim Brill, and any more of ther gang ez may be thar. An' I know thar's two or three more of 'em snoopin' around."

"Good, Kit. Thet's ther talk, an' I'm with yer," responded the girl, heartily, as she looked at her revolver, and saw that its six chambers were full. "Ther Gang hez allers kind o' trusted me, but I'll feel better when I've shown 'em thet they can't make me er partner—even er sleepin' partner—in their infernal business."

Kit rushed to the large room and banged open the door, with a look of fury on his face that meant mischief.

He stopped in dismay as soon as he got inside. *The room was quite empty!*

CHAPTER X.

A BREAK FOR THE OPEN.

"They can't be fur," exclaimed Keno Kit, as he looked around the room, and tried to understand what it meant, for he knew that there had been at least two people—Jim Brill and Pete Morrelli—in the room a few moments before, to say nothing of other members of the gang that Ruth declared she knew were about.

"Say, Kit," put in Abe Kimball, who had been quiet, as was his wont, since he had come up with the detective.

"Wal?"

"I'm kinder afeard of this hyar place. Thar's too much mystery about it ter suit me. I'm with yer if yer means ter take this hyar Black Oath Gang, but I'd like ter meet live men, an' not hev ter fight ghosts."

"Ghosts! What yer givin' us, Abe?" exclaimed Ruth, in deep disgust.

Hardly were the words out of her mouth, when she clutched convulsively at the detective, and pointed to the frame in which the photographs were placed, with a look of horror on her face altogether different from the careless good-humor usually depicted there.

In the centre of the frame, misty and vague, but still certainly there, was the face of Roland Bland, the brother of Guy, and who had been killed months before!

For an instant all three of the spectators were petrified. Then, with a yell of defiance, Keno Kit rushed forward, with his knife upraised, and tried to catch the Presence by the throat.

Before he could reach the frame the one lamp on the wall went out, and a draught of cold air rushed through the room with a moan, that seemed to the three people like a blast from a charnel house.

Keno Kit's blood was up now, and he pulled a match from his pocket and lighted it almost before the lamp flame had disappeared. Then he went to the lamp and lighted it, looking quickly around him the while.

The face had disappeared from the frame, but the detective was sure that it had been there, and he was not disposed to let the thing go by default. He tapped the frame and photographs with his knuckles, and then, assisted by the other two, pulled the photographs out from the center of the frame, revealing the wooden back.

"Thar is some deviltry connected with this thing," uttered the detective, "an' while I'm hyar I may ez well find out what it is."

He dug at the wood with his knife, and soon had it shivered to splinters. But there was nothing but the rocky wall behind it, and, so far as he could see, it was perfectly solid.

"Wal, Kit, what do yer think of it?"

There was a mischievous smile on the face of the girl as she said this, but Kit was too anxious to find out what the appearance of the mysterious face meant to take any notice of the remark.

"I'm er-goin' ter find my way through this cussed place, if it takes me all day. I came hyar ter clean out this gang, and I'll do it ez sure ez my name is Christopher Vance."

"Oh, give us er rest on thet Christopher Vance," said Ruth. "Your name is Keno Kit, and I don't want yet ter put on any agonies with yer friends."

Kit did not reply, but busied himself with looking about the room and trying to understand where the members of the gang had gone. The room was empty so far as the gang was concerned, and as there were only two doors besides that by which they had entered, it did not take him long to satisfy himself that there was no one near them.

There was a bar on each of the doors, and with a quick movement Kit slipped them into the iron staples that were secured at either side. Then he beckoned to his companions, and went out to the corridor where the two cells were.

"I've got ter hev this hyar boy out of hyar, somehow."

There was determination in his tone that could not be mistaken, as he went to the door of Cell Number Two and opened it, in spite of the warning hand of the girl on his arm.

"Whar's ther ladder, I wonder," said Kit.

"I told yer it wuz in ther one room ez I don't know—the room whar they makes ther coin," answered Ruth.

"Then I must get down without ther ladder."

"Yer can't do it."

"I must."

He stepped into the cell in which he had been confined, and brought out the lariat that had been used to tie his arms and legs. It was not more than four or five yards in length, and he shook his head as he regarded it.

"Thet won't do. I must find something better than thet."

"Say, Kit, it ain't no use your thinkin' about going down thet place by er rope. You can't do it. I guess ther thing ter do is ter find ther other way of gettin' at it."

"How?"

"Why, they put people down thet hole, an' they never take 'em up—this way. But they git 'em out somehow, when they're dead. An' we must try ter git down ther other way, whichever it is."

The detective saw that there was reason in the girl's argument, but he did not know how to make use of the suggestion. The whole place had given him a feeling of awe that he could not shake off, although he managed to keep up a good appearance of contempt for the horrors that surrounded him.

"If thar's nothin' more ter be done around hyar, I think it would be well to get out," suggested Abe, who was heartily tired of the adventure on every account.

Through the big room the three went, the same road that the detective had been carried, bound, by Pete Morrelli and Jim Brill. With eyes and ears alert, the three made their way along the narrow corridors, until in due time they found themselves in the open air, at the spot where the boy had found the Gang, and had been eventually taken prisoner.

The first thing that struck the detective was that the three horses had disappeared, and yet he could not see how they could have gone.

"Wal, it's clear ter me thet the gang hez got out of this, 'cause thar wuz three horses hyar, an' thar wuz others in ther stable thet hev gone."

As he spoke Kit opened a door hidden behind a bush that overhung the wall on the side away from the precipice and showed that there was a long stable, with rings for halters, and straw on the ground for bedding, while the odor told him that it had been occupied by horses not long before. At this time there were only three horses in the place, although there were accommodations for over twenty.

"Kit, I don't understand you," said the girl. "Sometimes you don't seem ter know much about this hyar place, an' then ag'in you kin tell how many horses thar ought ter be, an' all about it."

"Little gal, I wouldn't hev made ther many arrests I hev if I let everyone know jist what wuz in my mind. You saw how excited I got over the appearance of that face behind ther photograph frame, didn't ye?"

"Don't talk about it," shivered Abe. "I ain't skeared o' most things, but thet corpse face wuz too much fer me!"

"Oh, I don't know. What worried me wuz how it could be behind thet frame. But I know it wuz somewhar down hyar. I sprung thet feller on ther two scallawags afore, an' nearly scared ther life out of 'em. But it beats me how he got inter thet place whar we saw him jist now, an' thet wuz why I smashed ther frame. It wuz one reason, thet is. Another reason wuz thet I don't propose ter let these fellers keep pictures of de-

tectives an' police officers generally, an label 'em ther 'Rogues' Gallery.' See?"

"An' is thet Roland Bland thet we saw?" asked Abe Kimball, bending forward, eagerly.

"You could see fer yerself," answered the detective, with provoking calmness.

It was broad daylight now, and the red streaks across the eastern sky that had betokened the break of dawn had given way to the bright glow of a glorious summer day in one of the most beautiful States in the Union.

"What's thet over thar?" asked Ruth, suddenly, as she held her hand over her eyes and looked across the plain that stretched away from the foot of the bluff on which they stood.

"Horses, an' men on 'em, ez sure ez I'm erlive," exclaimed the detective.

"An', by gracious, thar's thet cussed feller, Silas Sloper, among 'em. See. Thar's three men, an' I'll bet ther other two is Pete Morrelli and Jim Brill.

"Like enough," answered the detective, "but you're wrong about ther number of 'em. Thar's four, an' ther fourth one is—Otis Garland!"

"Kit, we hev ter git out o' this, right quick," said the girl, who was the first to recover from the surprise into which they had been thrown. "I kin see thet two of 'em hez bags hanging over their saddles, an' I'll bet yer it is some of ther queer money thet they mean ter sell somewhar in ther East. I know ther ways. They're bound fer Chicago, an' they're takin' thet boy with 'em 'cause they wuz afraid ter do him up hyar while you wuz around."

"Guess you're right," responded the detective, looking at the girl admiringly. "An' if thet's ther case, we needn't bother about this hyar crib jist now. I hev been in it before, but this is ther fu'st time ez I've seen so much of it. Hows'ever, we'll git ter ther bottom of this hyar place when we come back. Jist at present I'm goin' after ther men we see out on ther plain yonder. Out in ther open I kin bring them ter time, I know, although they got ther best of me in this hyar hole. So come on."

"How air yer goin' ter chase 'em without horses?" asked Ruth.

"Thet's so," agreed the detective. "We'll hev ter go back ter ther Golden Glory an' git somethin' ter ride on. So come on Abe."

The three made their way to the secret mouth of the cavern, and in a few minutes were out on the hill looking at the fast disappearing forms of the four men on horseback.

"Say, Kit, I ain't said much about this hyar," observed Abe, after a long silence. "But it seems ter me thet it ain't much use chasing after them men now. We hev'n't hed no sleep, an' all three of us is petered out. Ther best thing will be ter go to ther house and take er snooze fer er few hours, an' then we'll be fit fer business."

"But they'll git clean away," remonstrated the detective.

"No, they won't," put in Ruth. "They're goin' ter take ther Southern Pacific at Maricopa, an' I happen ter know thet thar ain't any train fer the East till nine o'clock ter-night."

"Wal?"

"Wal, all we hev ter do is ter lay low fer ther day, an' git some sleep at ther house down hyar. Then, in ther evening, slide over ter Maricopa an' take them fellers in. It's ez easy er thing ez I ever see."

"You're right, Ruth."

Half an hour later they were all three in their respective bed-rooms at the Golden Glory saloon, fast asleep, while the interminable faro game went on in the big bar-room as usual.

CHAPTER XI.

GUY BLAND'S SCHEME.

It was seven o'clock when the detective, who had fallen asleep with the ease of a man used to broken rest, awoke. The sun was low in the heavens, but had not yet sunk behind the

hills, so that it was still broad daylight.

"Two hours afore thet train goes. Thet's all right. We kin git over thar in less than thet time, and bring 'em up short afore they kin get away."

In five minutes he was in the bar, where he found Abe Kimball all ready. Abe wore his silk hat and his neat business clothes, but the revolvers at his belt were plainly visible and there was a rather fiercer glitter in his eye than usual.

"I'm kinder sick o' this Black Oath Gang," he remarked, "and I blame myself fer not wiping them out in ther crib down thar. I think we've fooled too much time over them. I don't see why we couldn't take thet boy and shove ther gang in jail long afore this."

"Whar air ther horses?" asked Keno Kit, ignoring this ebullition of ill-temper.

Ruth led the way to the Golden Glory stables, where three horses had been saddled ready. All three had men's saddles, for Ruth Howard was not the girl to require a side-saddle. She rode like a man, and she rode well.

Kit looked at the big black stallion that he owned and was delighted to see that the animal was in good condition and eager to go out.

"Ah, Malcolm, old feller, we hev had many er good time together, haven't we?" murmured Kit, as he stepped to the head of his stallion.

The noble beast rubbed his velvet nose against the detective's cheek and whinnied, as if he understood every word said to him—which he doubtless did.

Ruth looked admiringly at the stallion for a moment, and then turned to a bay mare in the next stall that recognized her as quickly as Malcolm did Keno Kit.

"Don't be jealous, Daisy. We will make ez good er showing ez ther black when it comes to er run across the prairie, or a jump over a gulch, won't we?"

A dark brown horse was the animal to be ridden by Abe Kimball, and as soon as each had been assigned to his or her horse the three animals were let loose, to make their own way to the front of the Golden Glory, which they did as a matter of course.

There were not many people in the saloon, for the faro game had stopped for an hour or two, and Waxy, the ruddy-faced man who had taken the place of Abe at the table the night before, was behind the bar straightening things out until the regular bartender should come in. In a place like the Golden Glory, that never closed, it was not easy to have regular hours for any one.

As they entered the saloon, there was a man in well-cut, fashionable clothes, and wearing a silk hat, standing at the bar, with his back to the door.

"Who's thet?" asked Kit, suspiciously.

"It's one of ther people connected with ther Maricopa mine, up in ther mountains," explained Ruth. "I think he's ther manager."

As Ruth spoke, the stranger turned, and Keno Kit saw that it was Guy Bland.

The waxed mustaches and the general air of being well groomed that distinguished Guy Bland when the detective saw him through the window as he was making his bargain with Jim Brill and Cock-eyed Sam some weeks before were very different from the unkempt, tough appearance that he had presented when he showed himself to the Black Oath Gang in the underground crib the night before.

"What's he doin' hyar?" whispered the detective to Abe Kimball.

Before Abe could answer, Guy Bland said, gently: "I beg your pardon, but did I understand that you were curious about my business here? I shall be pleased to give you all the information on the subject that I can, I am sure."

"Cuss him! He hez mighty sharp ears," muttered the detective, under his breath. Then, aloud: "I am naterally interested in strangers in Devil's Canyon, 'cause we don't hev many."

"My dear fellow, I am not a stranger. Allow me to offer you my card."

As he spoke he drew forth a handsome card case from his vest pocket and handed an immaculate card to the detective with the grace of a cultivated man of the world.

"He's er dandy," thought the detective, as he took the card and looked at the name upon it.

In beautiful copperplate was the simple inscription, "Mr. Guy Bland." That was all, and as Kit knew the name of the smiling stranger before, the card conveyed very little information of value.

"I am the new manager of the Maricopa Mine, in which my deceased brother was largely interested. It is a natural thing for me to take charge of the works at the mine, don't you think. There is a great deal of valuable machinery there, and the insurance company and other concerns in Chicago and other cities with which I am connected have large interests in it. We are thinking of extending the plant, too. There are some rich deposits of gold here that have not been worked yet, that we mean to get out. I shall have great pleasure in showing you anything that I can about the mine, if you care to come up there, at any time."

The calmness of the man would have nonplussed the detective had he not been used to just such bluffs on the part of men whom he knew to be other than they seemed.

Mr. Guy Bland turned to the bar again and drank his glass of mineral water. Then, with a sweeping bow, he went out, and strolled carelessly up the street in the direction of the Maricopa Mine.

"Kit," said Ruth, as soon as Guy had disappeared.

"Wal?"

"Thet means mischief."

"What do yer mean?"

"I mean thet thar skunk is in with ther Black Oath Gang, and thet he didn't tell yer all ther truth jist now."

"Did he tell me anything thet wuzn't er cussed lie?" asked Kit, with a frown.

"Yes; some of ther things he said wuz true enough. He is ther manager up thar, ez he said, although I don't know how he managed ter put it on ther eye of ther owners of ther mine. Then it is true thet his brother, old Roland Bland, owned stock in it, and it is true thet thar is er great deal of vallable machinery up thar. All thet stuff about ther insurance companies I dunno about. I don't believe thet he hez any partiickler pull with ther companies, an' I don't believe thet he hez ther right ter take entire charge of ther mine, or at least I don't think he would if ther owners wuz ter know his record."

"How do you know all this, Ruth?"

"I dunno how I know it, but I know it," answered Ruth confidently. "I warn't never mistook in er man yit, an' I tell yer I don't like ther look of thet skunk, an' I didn't ther fu'st time I seen him!"

As the girl spoke, she moved toward the window that commanded a view of Devil's Canyon, and watched the retreating form of Guy Bland, but stood in such a position that she would be invisible to him should he happen to turn around.

He did turn around, casting a furtive look over his shoulder, and then, satisfied that no one was looking at him from the Golden Glory saloon, he suddenly leaped to the side of the gulch and climbed up the steep bank, till he stood on an eminence from which he could gain a pretty good view of the surrounding country.

"Say, Kit, what does thet mean?"

"Jist lookin' around him, I suppose," answered the detective, carelessly.

"It means more than thet," returned the girl, with conviction. "I tell yer

he's mixed up with thet thar Black Oath Gang in some way, an' he wants ter see if ther coast is cl'ar fer them. I believe he knows purty nigh all thet took place in ther cavern last night, an' thet ez soon ez we go after them fellers, he'll take er hand!"

"I know he hez some dealin's with Jim Brill an' thet miserable greaser, but I don't think ez he's in ther Black Oath Gang," observed Kit, slowly and reflectively.

It should be remembered that Keno Kit did not see Guy Bland in the cave, and had no idea that he was down there, in mining clothes.

The detective was watching Guy Bland as he spoke, and he soon saw the new manager let himself down to the road, brushing his clothes delicately with his hand, while an ugly smile twitched his waxed mustache, and caused Ruth to finger the trigger of her revolver impatiently and suggestively.

"Wal, Keno Kit, air we goin' ter stay hyar, watchin' thet feller travelin' up ther gulch, or air we goin' ter ketch them rascals thet we hev in our minds?" asked Abe Kimball, as he tightened his belt, and looked down at his revolvers.

The horses were pawing impatiently in the road, and now Malcolm, the big black stallion, came up to the window, and looked in at the detective, as much as to say, "When are we going to start?"

"Say, Kit," said Ruth suddenly as she looked up at him with an expression in her face that told of a new idea in her mind.

"What is it, little gal?"

"I don't think we'd better hit over thet railroad station without knowin' what this hyar manager is er-goin' ter do."

"Um!" grunted Abe, who was tired of the delay, already, and who did not like the notion of waiting any longer.

"But what makes yer think he's goin' ter do anything, Ruth?" asked Keno Kit.

"I feel it in my bones. Thet's all."

This was not exactly explanatory, but the detective had great faith in the girl, and he could not ignore her intuition now, especially as he had his own suspicions of Guy Bland, and was inclined to look after his movements, even without the girl's suggestion.

"I guess we'll foller him," he said, after a pause.

It was getting dark, and the impatient Kimball looked at his watch, and saw that it was nearly eight o'clock—one hour before the train was scheduled to start from Maricopa.

"We won't ride, I suppose," he said.

"No, certainly not," answered Ruth quickly.

The faro game was resumed, and Taxey took the dealer's chair, as Keno Kit, Abe Kimball and Ruth made their way swiftly up the gulch, in the rapidly deepening shadows.

"What do yer think he means ter do, Kit?" asked Abe, after a long pause.

"Hevn't any idee, but I s'pose we'll find out when we git thar."

The gulch came to an end at last, and then the three turned short around a path to the left, that led up into the mountains, opposite to the way that took them to the cavern of the Black Oath Gang the night before.

A sharp walk of about fifteen minutes, among great trees, loose boulders, and generally uneven ground, but always ascending, brought them at last, as they turned short around a corner of the rocks, into the ruddy glow of a large fire on the hillside around which they could see the dark figures of men moving busily, evidently intent on their work, and paying no attention to anything else.

It was the Maricopa mine, and the great shutes and other machinery used in placer-mining, with the clanking of the stamp mill, told that the mine was in active operation.

"Whar's ther manager, I wonder,"

whispered Abe Kimball, as the detective led the way, by a tortuous path, toward the group of men in the circle of fire-light.

"He ain't fur off. He asked us ter come down an' see him, an' I guess I will pay him er visit quicker'n he expected to see me."

The office that the manager used when he was around the works was only a shed, with windows on the side facing the part of the mine where the machinery was placed.

The shed was dark, as the three people from the Golden Glory made their way toward it, but it lighted up suddenly, and they could see that Guy Bland was inside. He took off his silk hat, and replaced it with a soft hat, such as the miners wore, his movements being perfectly plain to the watchers, because he was standing in a strong light.

He disappeared, having evidently gone into a little cupboard that was also easily to be seen, and there he stayed for such a time that the impatient Kimball chafed and growled perpetually.

"Hello! Look at thet!" exclaimed the detective.

The man that came from the cupboard did not look at all like the sleek, well-dressed man that went into it. He was a coarse-looking laboring man, in rough mining clothes, including a flannel shirt, overalls, and high boots outside. There was a blue and white spotted handkerchief tied loosely around his throat where the open shirt showed his bare flesh, and the waxed mustache had given place to a rough and loose scraggy substitute, that looked as if it had never known wax in its whole existence.

"Thet feller is either er crook, or an actor," muttered Keno Kit, as he looked eagerly at Guy. "It ain't often yer find er man ez kin change his looks in thet way in sich er short time, who is perfectly straight, unless it happens ter be his business."

"Like yours, eh, Kit?" observed Ruth.

"Yes, Ruth, like mine," responded the detective, gravely.

"Wal, what air we goin' ter do?" asked Kimball, testily. "I s'pose we can't jump in thar an' growl at him fer takin' ther wax out of his mustache, an' gittin' inter old duds, eh?"

"No, of course. But—ah! What's he doin' now?"

The tones of the detective told how deeply interested he was in Guy Bland's movements, and, without another word, he made his way down the slope, and took up his position close to the window of the little shed, where he was still unobserved by the workmen.

"Just what I thought," he muttered. "He's telegraphing er warning to his pals at Maricopa! He is using electricity to keep the Black Oath Gang out of my hands. But I'll beat him at his own game, ez sure ez my name is Keno Kit!"

CHAPTER XII.

TAPPING THE WIRE.

Guy Bland had seated himself at a small table, on which was something covered with black oilskin. When he removed the oilskin, Keno Kit saw the bright shining brass of a Morse telegraph instrument, and at the same time saw the wires running up the side of the room, and across, over Bland's head, till they reached the wall, and came through the rough wooden weatherboarding to a pole that stood out in the open, and which, in fact, had afforded a shelter for the detective while investigating the proceedings of the man in the little office.

"Ef I could only hear what he's sayin' on thet thing," muttered Kit, as he pressed a little nearer to the window.

"Hold on, thar, Kit. Ef he sees yer, ther whole scheme will be busted," whispered the voice of Ruth Howard, in his ear, as she pulled him back.

"What cussed foolery is this hyar?" growled Abe Kimball, who was becoming more and more impatient every minute.

"Do you think we kin git ter thet railroad station in time now, Kit?"

"Of course not," answered the detective, coolly.

"Then ther gang will git erway."

"I don't think so."

"Abe, don't interfere with things ez yer don't understand," put in Ruth. "I'll bank on Keno Kit every time."

"So will I, ez er general thing," acquiesced Abe, sulkily. "But, hang me ef I don't like ter see my way cl'ar er little, an' I don't see it now."

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated in a disgusted tone. "What do yer mean by 'why'? Hyar we know them fellers mean ter git out of this part of ther country, by er train ez leaves Maricopa at nine o'clock, an' it's nearly nine now, an' we air er mile or two away from the depot."

"Keep yer hair on, Abe. We'll git thar after er while. I want ter see what this hyar feller is doin' at ther telegraph instrument."

"How air yer goin' ter do it?"

"I must git inter thet room, an' listen."

"Yer can't do it."

"I will do it," answered Kit, quietly, but with a determined ring in his tone that could not be mistaken.

Ruth did not try to detain Kit now, as he slid from the shelter of the pole and pushed gently against the door. To his joy he found that it was unfastened, and it yielded to his cautious pressure, so that, by pressing his face against the doorpost he could distinguish the sounds of the instrument, that was ticking vigorously in answer to something that Guy Bland had sent.

"It's er good job that I've been an operator in ther course of my life," muttered Keno Kit. "A man never knows when his knowledge is goin' ter be useful ter him."

The sounder of the instrument was ticking off these words, which in their dots and dashes were as plain to the detective as the articulation of a human voice:

"This is Maricopa. The three people, two men and a boy, a half-breed, will not go on that nine o'clock train. They are at the hotel. But they mean to start at midnight, they say. Probably they will go on the freight that stops here for water for the engine."

"All right," ticked off Guy Bland, in reply, with a dexterity that showed he was familiar with the instrument.

"What directions have you for them?" came over the wire again.

"I will send them in half an hour," answered Guy Bland. "Watch the wire at that time and be ready to take the message as soon as I send it. Those men must be well out of this part of the country to-night."

"Oho! So thet's ther game, is it?" muttered the detective, as he drew back from the door to hide himself in case the other should come out.

"Wal, Kit, how goes it?" whispered Ruth, at his elbow.

"All right! Git back from thar an' help me do somethin'. I'm goin' ter fool him on thet thar message."

"What message?"

"Git back, I tell yer, gal. I wuzn't talkin' ter you. I wuz jist gassin' ter myself. I hev ter go inter this little office and git somethin' I want."

As he spoke, he seized the girl around the waist and lifted her by main strength away from the door and to the retreat behind the pole before she realized his intention.

She understood the movement at once, however, when she saw Guy Bland come out of the office, closing it behind him with a spring lock, and walk toward a group of workmen busy at the big chute that came from the hilltop into the heart of the valley.

"Stay hyar," whispered Kit. "I won't be a minute."

"What's ther game, Kit?" put in Abe Kimball, considerably mystified by the whole performance.

"Wait hyar a moment and you'll soon see."

Abe didn't like being shut off in this manner, but he was not a bad fellow at heart, as the reader has already seen, and he had enough confidence in Keno Kit to feel sure that he knew what he was about.

"Keep quiet, Abe," commanded Ruth. "All right, Kit. Go ahead."

The detective ran quickly back to the door, while Guy Bland stood among his men and was evidently giving orders.

"I saw another instrument in thar up in er corner, an' some linemen's tools by the'r side. I've got ter hev ther whole business."

The door was fastened with a spring lock, but it was the work of an instant to push the lock back with the point of his bowie knife, and, after one quick look around to make sure that Bland was still occupied with his men, Kit crawled into the office on his hands and knees, so that he should not be seen through the window.

There was a strong lamp alight in the office, and his movements would have been as public to any one outside as Guy Bland's had been to him.

The object he sought was in a distant corner, and he went for it straight, with a smile of joy in his face as he saw his way clear to the accomplishment of his desire.

He grabbed the instrument and a bundle of tools fastened together by a string and backed away with them. Looking out of the doorway, and seeing Bland still with his men, stooping over something on the ground, he ran out of the office, fastening the door behind him with a bang, and sought shelter behind his friendly pole.

Guy Bland turned quickly as the sound of the door banging reached him, but as there was considerable noise from the clanking of machinery in the stamping mill he took it for granted that the sound was caused by something of the kind.

"Now, friend Bland, I think I can circumvent your game and get the Black Oath Gang where I want 'em," observed Kit, triumphantly, as he examined the tools and found that they consisted of a pair of "climbers," such as linemen use for going up telegraph poles, two pairs of nippers for cutting wire, and a hammer.

"What air them things, Kit?" asked Abe.

"What air yer goin' ter do with 'em? That's more to ther point," added Ruth.

"I am goin' ter tap ther wire an' find out jist what Guy Bland says ter ther gang, and what ther gang says ter him. See?"

"Good!" ejaculated Ruth admiringly.

Keno Kit looked about him, and then, with a warning look to Abe, climbed the pole without any assistance from the "climbers" and felt the wires that were fastened to the top.

"This hyar is ther line, sure," he muttered, as he found himself above the glow of the fire that was still burning, so that no one could perceive him high above their heads.

He felt the direction of the wire, and found that it communicated directly with the office from which he had just taken the instrument and the linemen's tools.

He shinned down the pole again and looked out to see what Guy Bland was about.

"Hist! Look out!" he muttered. "Down! Down!"

His companions obeyed his quick movement and hid themselves on the ground as they saw Guy Bland striding directly toward them. When he had arrived within a few feet of the pole, he stood and looked at them, and each instinctively clutched a weapon, ready to meet any aggressive movement he might make.

He did not see them evidently, for his gaze wandered up and down the pole, as if seeking something that he thought should be there.

"I don't know how it is, but I feel

suspicious to-night. I don't trust the members of the Black Oath Gang, of course, and I do not know what mischief that detective Keno Kit may have in his mind. I am glad he does not recognize me, or it might be awkward. Anyhow, I'll go into the office and send that message to them, and perhaps I shall be able to tell what they are thinking about."

He hastened toward the office, and as he moved away from the pole Keno Kit took the instrument in his arms, seized the shears for cutting the wire, and went up the pole, hand over hand.

Guy Bland had reached his office, and was standing looking at the telegraph instrument in a reflective manner. If he had gone there immediately and tried to communicate with Maricopa, he would have struck something that would have astonished him, for at that moment Keno Kit was busy with the wire.

"I think by the time I have this fixed I shall be able to make things come our way. It's er great game."

Upon cutting the wire, he went down the pole rapidly.

Near the pole there was a clump of trees, and into this thicket they retreated hurriedly, Kit looking behind him as they ran and noticing that Guy Bland had seated himself at the table in his little office, ready to send a message.

"He can poke at thet thar thing all he likes fer any good it will do him," muttered Kit, "but until I choose ter give him connection he won't know anything. Then I guess I kin fill him up with anything I like."

The transmitter that the Arizona Detective had taken was a double one, so that he had room to make connection with four wires on the one board. It took him a few moments to do it, but he did it much quicker than a stranger could have accomplished it, his experience as a telegraph operator years ago being very useful to him.

"There air two keys hyar, an' I will jist break off ther communication and say what I like to each of 'em," observed Kit, as he tried to raise Maricopa on the line leading that way.

He was unable to get a response, but the sounder from the other end—from the office at the Maricopa mine—began to rattle off "MP," "MP," "MP," "MP," over and over again.

"Ah, I see the reason I couldn't git 'em. I didn't know ther call. MP is ther call for Maricopa. Wal, I've learned thet much, anyhow," said Keno Kit, as he smiled with satisfaction.

"Say, Kit. This hyar may be great fun fer you, but it's kinder slow fer us. Why don't we go on ter Maricopa and nail them fellers, without waiting fer all this telegraphing an' foolin'?" said Abe, in a grumbling tone.

"'Cause thar is er great many fellers thar in Maricopa thet would put them on their guard, an' we would hev our fun fer nothin'. Thet's why, Abe Kimball," said Ruth. "Go on, Kit."

Keno Kit was too much occupied with his instrument to bother much about Abe's impatience. He was thinking what he should say to Guy when he answered him, and he made up his mind what to do without more delay.

The call for "MP" still came, and Kit was listening to it with an amused expression of countenance. At last he answered, and then came the question: "What's the matter with you? Asleep?"

"Not much!" observed Kit, with a smile. "I think he will find that I am very wide awake." But he turned to his instrument and tapped out:

"What do you want?"

"Who is that?"

"Now," said Kit, "I don't know what to say. He had some arrangement, I suppose, for a certain name to come back. However, I must bluff it out." So he answered on the wire:

"I am the man you know. I don't want to give a name. It is not safe. Understand?"

"I don't know whether thet thar bluff will work," said Kit, anxiously, "but I hope it will."

"Listen," interrupted Ruth. "Thar goes ther ticker."

Surely enough, the sounder went on: "I suppose you are right. Now listen carefully."

"Go on," answered Kit.

"Ride, all three of you, to thet place whar ther big broken cottonwood stands at the side of the track. The fast freight that stops at Maricopa for water must take you on to Prescott. Pile up something on the track at the big cottonwood, and signal the train. When the train stops, sneak into one of the cars, that will be open for you. I have fixed that. The engineer would stop anyhow, because the brakeman on the train that is in the scheme would find some way of doing it. But if you stop the engine yourself in the way I tell you, it will save trouble."

Here the ticker stopped, and Kit looked at his companions in the glare that came from the fire blaze around the mine; there was a fierce light in his eyes that would not have reassured Guy Bland if he could have seen it.

The sounder rapped impatiently, asking why he did not answer, and Kit hastened to reply:

"All right. I will do as you say. Do not make me answer you again, because there are people coming in here, and I am afraid to spend time sending messages when I have nothing to say."

"You are right," flashed back from Guy. "You understand your orders. Now go ahead. When you get to Prescott, wait for me."

"All right," answered Kit.

Hardly had Kit finished these two words when there came a call from Maricopa. To this Kit answered, without waste of time:

"Wait till I come.—Bland."

"Now, what?" asked Abe, still impatiently.

"What? Why, isn't it plain what?" responded the detective. "All we hev ter do is ter take them horses, and git over ter Maricopa ez soon ez we kin."

"Anything is better than staying around hyar," said Abe. "If I didn't think a great deal of yer, an' if I didn't hate thet thar Black Oath Gang, I wouldn't hev put in ther evening this hyar way, I tell yer straight."

Keno Kit did not answer, and the three made their way as quickly as possible to the Golden Glory saloon, to get their horses, for the ride over to Maricopa.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TICKLISH MOMENT.

The three horses made little of the run over to Maricopa, and Kit felt that his big stallion would be good for many miles more if necessary.

It was after eleven when the three rode to the end of the long street in Maricopa, across the upper end of which ran the branch railroad to Prescott, where it made connection with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Road.

"Everything seems ter be dark 'cept at ther railroad station. I guess thet's ther place whar ther telegraph instrument is," muttered Kit. "We'll hev ter git thar without goin' inter ther town. If we air seen hyar, it will knock our scheme sky-high. Thar's lots of fellers ez would take er delight in blockin' my game, 'specially when they knew I wuz after ther Black Oath Gang. Them fellers hez any number of people on ther staff in this hyar town. Blamed ef I don't think ther gang owns ther place. Wal, I'll soon own them, ez sure ez my name is Keno Kit."

"Good, old sport. Thet's what I like ter hear yer say. Foller me! I'll show yer ther way ter git around this hyar place."

Ruth touched up her well-trained mare as she spoke, and the animal bounded away in the darkness, with its two companions close on her heels. The

road was rough and hilly and there were gullies that had to be leaped by the horses as they came to them, and stumps that had to be avoided, and trees that had to be dodged.

It seemed as if the instinct of the mare was enough to take her the right road, so that the girl perched on its back had little to do beyond sticking on the back of her mare.

They went a long detour, and almost lost sight of the town several times. Suddenly they turned a corner of a thicket, and there was just a single ray of light from a window high above the ground, that Ruth said was the railroad station.

"What's thet light?" asked Abe.

"It comes from ther signal station, above ther track," answered Ruth. "Thar's one person up thar who signals ther trains and uses ther telegraph wire."

"Who is it—a young man?" asked Kit.

"No."

"A young gal?"

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"Think she wuz ther party at ther end of ther telegraph wire when I wuz takin' ther message jist now?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Then she's in ther business with ther Black Oath Gang, eh?"

"She's er friend of theirs, I guess, but no one kin prove it on her," answered Ruth, carelessly.

"Wal, thet's enough. I guess I kin attend to her case at ther proper time. If this hyar's ther place, we may ez well see what we air going ter do."

Keno Kit rode up to the signal station, and saw that there was an outside staircase leading to the door.

As he sat on Malcolm's back he could reach the door with the butt end of his riding whip, which was a long quirt, and he rapped at the door loudly.

There was no answer, and Ruth whispered: "You can't git ahead of thet party. She knows what we want, but she is lyin' low. She's er sharp one, I tell yer. She saw us comin' up hyar, an' I shouldn't wonder if she wuz tryin' ter git Guy Bland on ther wire."

Keno Kit laughed silently as he thought how fruitless would be such an attempt, now that he had cut the connection. Then he hammered on the door again.

"Well, what is it?" cried a sharp voice, as the door swung open and a very stout young woman of about thirty, with a huge shock of fiery red hair, stood at the top of the stairs, with a revolver in her hand.

"Don't point thet cussed gun at me!" expostulated Keno Kit. "We ain't robbers."

"I dunno about that."

"Now, see hyar, my dear young lady," continued Kit, soothingly. "We only want ter ask yer er nice, perlite question, an' I kin tell by ther look of yer thet yer'll answer it right away."

As the detective spoke, he leaped from the back of his black stallion and ran lightly up the staircase.

"Stop!"

There was a decided threat in the tone in which the red-headed woman yelled this word, and to emphasize her word she shoved the muzzle of the big revolver into Keno Kit's face, so that it almost touched his forehead.

"What's ther matter?" he asked.

"Nothing is the matter so long as you don't come any further. If you do, I'll shoot you, as sure as my name is 'Mandy Perkins!'"

Keno Kit stopped and looked at her with something of admiration for her pluck as he said, tranquilly:

"So your name is 'Mandy Perkins, eh? I used ter know er gal of thet name down in Connecticut, and she was a good deal like you, only not so good-lookin'."

"Indeed. Well, you can't fool me with that kind of buncombe. I was

born in Connecticut, and people from New England are not to be fooled with soft words."

She pushed the pistol closer to the detective, so that he actually felt it on his forehead.

"Say, what air yer givin' us up thar?" put in Ruth, who was too indignant over the attitude of the red-headed girl to care for her pistol, or anything else.

The red-headed girl glanced down at Ruth, who was sitting on her mare near the detective, but did not deign to reply.

The diversion gave Keno Kit a chance, however, that he availed himself of on the moment. Seizing the barrel of 'Mandy Perkins's pistol, he turned the muzzle away from himself and with a quick wrench tore it out of her grasp. Then, with a little grunt of triumph, he sprang up the remaining stairs and rushed into the room.

"Wal, what's this?" he cried.

"What's what?" growled Abe Kimball, as he threw himself off his horse and ran up the stairs after the detective, unceremoniously pushing 'Mandy Perkins aside as he did so.

For answer, Keno Kit came to the door with the limp body of Otis Garland in his arms.

"Not dead?" cried Ruth.

"No, but they've tried ter fix him so ez he would die, I believe."

'Mandy Perkins rushed up the stairs and seized the key of the telegraph instrument, but before she could use it Ruth Howard was at her side and had torn her from the table.

"Let go, you she devil!" bawled 'Mandy.

"Yes, I'll let yer go after I've pulled yer cussed red hair out!" returned Ruth Howard, as she twisted her fingers into the locks of her enemy.

Kimball and Kit both laughed, in spite of the fact that they were anxious about the boy, Otis Garland, and did not know how soon the freight train on which they expected Jim Brill and Pete Morrelli to make their escape would come swishing by.

Ruth Howard was much smaller than the fat 'Mandy Perkins, but she was also much stronger, for her muscles were like steel and she was as active as a cat.

'Mandy was fat and unwieldy, and now that her pistol had been taken from her her courage seemed to have evaporated to a large extent. Still, she kept her hold on Ruth's shoulders, and did her best to save her hair from being pulled out by the roots.

The two girls scuttled about the little office and knocked over the operator's chair with a crash. Then Ruth sat 'Mandy down on the table with a bang, and away went the telegraph instrument, the wires breaking off short and destroying all telegraphic communication with any other point.

Keno Kit saw this, and he was rather glad of it, for he did not want the fat girl to call for assistance from another station, while as for its effect on trains, he knew that there would be no other train after the freight until broad daylight.

Ruth Howard, with her supple movements and powerful grasp, had overcome 'Mandy completely, and the fat girl puffed and sputtered in her endeavor to shake off her lively little antagonist.

Abe Kimball was dancing around them in great glee, but Keno Kit was giving most of his attention now to the boy, who was leaning against the wall with just enough consciousness to save himself from falling flat upon the floor.

"Kit," he whispered, just as Ruth Howard succeeded in dropping the red-headed young woman to the floor and was sitting upon her to hold her down while the two tried to regain their breath.

"Kit," repeated Otis.

"Hello!"

"You'll have to hurry. Those fellows saw that you were coming, and they dasn't let you catch them now. There's Jim Brill, Pete Morrelli and that fool of a Silas Sloper, with a lot of bogus notes and brass coin that they intend to take to Chicago. They thought they had me safe and they didn't mind talking before me. It would not have made any difference, anyhow, because they knew that I understood their game and that they could not hide it from me."

"But whar air they now?"

"Down the road. Waiting to get on that freight when it comes along," was the reply.

Otis had been gradually recovering himself, and now he spoke with a clearness that showed that the drug with which he had been dosed was losing its effect.

Toot! Toot!

The whistle of an engine in the distance could be heard faintly echoing in the night air.

"There it is. You must move quickly, Kit, if you intend to catch them," exclaimed the young boy, greatly excited.

"Where will they try to get on the train?"

"Right here at the station. They stop here to water the engine. As soon as they stop the three fellows will get into an empty car with an open door that they expect to find, and away they will go."

"Without you?"

"No. That is where you will be able to catch them. They gave me some stuff in a drink of water, and it made me awfully sick. But they must have miscalculated the quantity, or I have a strong constitution, for it did not last as long as they thought it would. Before I fell over senseless, I heard Jim Brill say that I was fixed for all night, but you see I am all right now."

Toot! Toot!

Again the whistle, this time a great deal nearer.

"Look out, Kit, and give me a pistol, if you have one, so that I may take a hand in this fight," begged the boy, earnestly.

The pistol he had snatched from 'Mandy Perkins lay on the floor, and the detective picked it up and gave it to the boy, together with a cartridge belt that lay on the table and which it appeared that 'Mandy intended to use for her revolver in case she should discharge the cartridges it contained.

"What am I ter do with this hyar fat gal?" demanded Ruth, as 'Mandy made a futile attempt to rise.

"Let her alone. She can't do any harm, now," answered the detective.

Toot! toot! sounded the engine now, close to them, and, before the detective knew what was going to take place, there was the sound of grinding brakes, rumbling wheels and hissing steam almost under the signal house, and before these sounds had died away there were other noises that told of the stopping of a heavy train just outside the circle of light thrown upon the track from the lamp in the windows of the signal-house.

"Douse ther glim," cried Ruth.

Like a flash, Kit turned out the big lamp that was illuminating the whole neighborhood.

Hardly had he done so when there was a rush of heavy feet on the outside staircase, the door burst open, and three men filed into the room.

"Whar air yer, 'Mandy, an' what's ther matter with yer lamp?" demanded a gruff voice.

Ruth gave the red-headed girl a warning poke, and she did not dare to answer.

"Whar air yer? Cuss yer!" continued the gruff voice.

It was that of Jim Brill, and the detective, Abe and Ruth all knew that his two companions were Pete Morrelli, the Mexican, and Silas Sloper.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BLUFF BY 'MANDY.

For a moment there was silence save for the thumping of the heavy boots of the three intruders.

Then, Jim Brill, as he made his way further into the room, stumbled over 'Mandy Perkins and Ruth Howard, lying in the middle of the floor.

With an oath he stooped, and grabbed at the first person he could lay his hands on. It happened to be 'Mandy, and as the man's tough fingers tangled themselves in her long red hair, she uttered a shriek.

"Cuss it! What's this hyar?" bawled Brill, as he pulled 'Mandy to her feet and tried to see her face in the darkness.

"It's me, Mr. Brill!"

"Who's me?"

Before any one could reply, Pete Morrelli found himself in the grasp of Abe Kimball, while Silas Sloper, plug hat and all, received a hearty punch from the fist of the detective that sent him tumbling all over himself down the stairs, and upon the railroad track.

Silas did not wait for anything more. He rushed up the track toward the freight train. Stooping at the side of the track, he picked up two heavy bags and a big bundle, and the next moment he was safely ensconced in a corner of a freight car that was provided with a lot of sacks in one corner, and after looking at his precious hat, as well as he could in the gloom, to make sure that it was not much injured, he lugged the two bags and the two parcels into the car, and curled himself up on the sacks.

Then he closed his eyes, and dropped to sleep as tranquilly as if there were no howling men within a hundred yards of him.

In the mean time, the battle raged in the signal house, and all in the dark. 'Mandy dragged herself loose, and Ruth managed to hit Jim Brill a hard blow on the shoulder with the barrel of her revolver, causing him to howl with pain and dismay, for he did not know how many foes there might be in the dark.

Pete Morrelli was as a child in the hands of Abe Kimball, and as the owner of the Golden Glory saloon pulled him backward and forward, the Mexican wished he was out of it.

He soon had his wish, for as he and his antagonist staggered about the little room, they fell out of the door, and missed their footing on the top step. Abe Kimball released his hold on the Mexican to try to save himself, and Pete rolled over and over by himself to the bottom.

"Cuss him! He's got away from me!" muttered Abe, as he saw the figure of Pete scurrying away in the gloom.

For an instant Abe Kimball, who had slid to the bottom, and who had run a few yards after the Mexican as soon as he recovered himself, had an idea of chasing him to the train, which loomed up, a great shadow, some distance away. Then he remembered that Jim Brill, the most dangerous man of the three, was engaging Keno Kit, and he feared that an accidental advantage in the dark might result in Jim overcoming the detective.

This thought was enough for Abe. He was not afraid that Jim Brill could hurt Kit in a fair fight, but this battling in the dark was a different thing, and Abe did not want to take any chances. With a bound he was on the stairs, but before he could run up, something hit him bang in the chest, and he fell over backward.

"What's this?" he yelled.

He scrambled to his feet and saw that some one was rushing away toward the train, while the warning toot of the engine signified that it was just ready to start.

"Look out! He's goin' ter git erway!" bawled the detective, close to his ear, and he saw Keno Kit leap upon the back of the stallion that had stood quietly, with the other two horses, throughout the turmoil, and gallop up

the track just as the train began to steam away.

"Come on, Abe!"

It was the voice of Ruth Howard, and she, too, leaped upon her mare, and dashed after the train.

Abe Kimball looked at her for a moment, and then turned and walked calmly up the stairs into the signal house, where 'Mandy Perkins had lighted the lamp, and was looking in dismay at the havoc that had been wrought in her small domain within the last half hour.

"Wal, I guess this hyar means jail fer you, young woman," observed Abe, quietly.

The fat girl did not answer. She was busy connecting the wires with her instrument, and listening for a "call" from some other point.

She hadn't long to wait. There was an impatient clicking of "MP," the Maricopa number, and 'Mandy was trying to collect her ideas so that she could answer properly.

When 'Mandy sent her reply to the call, the next thing that came over the wire from Phenix was:

"What's the matter? Anything wrong?"

"No."

"You are sending in a very shaky way."

"Don't feel well."

"You won't have to quit, will you? Don't leave the office without some one there."

'Mandy turned from the instrument in disgust.

She sat down again to the telegraph instrument and tapped off:

"The Number Nine freight is just leaving Maricopa. There is nothing wrong."

She got up from the instrument and soon straightened things so that the office looked somewhat as it should under ordinary circumstances. Then she looked at Kimball inquiringly.

"Who's yer folks?" asked Abe, coolly.

"Ain't got none here. I come from Connecticut. I have one brother, who lives at Devil's Canyon."

"What's his name?"

"Silas Sloper."

"Whew!"

The whistle that Abe Kimball uttered was loud and long, and he moved as if he would catch hold of 'Mandy by her red hair and turn her round so that he could look into her face. But he didn't. He contented himself with standing in silent contemplation of her as she wound up the clock and pointed to the time.

It was two o'clock. The dead of the night!

"Wal, thar's nothin' fer me ter do but ter go back to ther Golden Glory an' see how things is goin'. I've put in ernough time over this hyar affair of Kit's. As fer Ruth, I'm in er almighty bad fix over her. She's er little too much fer me, an' I won't never bring up ernother sister-in-law, if I know it."

As Abe Kimball reflected thus in barely audible tones, 'Mandy tried hard to catch what he was saying, but she was unable to hear anything but the last sentence, and that conveyed only a slight amount of information to her.

"He hez er nice time on his hands now," continued Abe to himself, his mind turning off to the detective. "I s'pose he'll git them fellers, however, an' when he hez Silas Sloper with him thar'll be trouble fer this young woman."

All 'Mandy could hear of these remarks were the words "young woman," which she rightly conjectured to apply to herself.

"You are a member of the Black Oath Gang!" exclaimed Abe Kimball, suddenly, as he caught the eye of 'Mandy Perkins with his own.

'Mandy did not appear to be the least disturbed by the charge. She returned his gaze calmly, and replied:

"You're a liar!"

"You talk right out, don't yer? Wal,

ef you ain't in ther Gang yerself, you stand in with them ez is, an' it'll be jist ez bad fer you when they come ter be rounded up."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Wal, yer'll know more'n yer do now after er while. What do yer mean by sayin' yer don't stand in with them fellers, when yer hed thet boy hyar, insensible, an' Jim Brill an' ther rest of ther fellers comin' inter ther place ez if they owned it?"

"I ain't no right to tell you anything as I know," answered 'Mandy. "But I will tell you. The explanation is jist this—"

The sounder of the instrument interrupted her at this moment with its call, "MP," and 'Mandy sat down to the table mechanically, opened the key, and answered.

There was a rapid interchange of taps and clicks between her and the party at the other end of the wire, and once or twice 'Mandy looked up furtively at Abe Kimball.

"I'd give twenty dollars ter know what thet thar is," he muttered. "Why didn't I l'arn thet dot-and-dash language? I might hev done it ez easy ez I l'arned ter play poker, an' I guess it 'ud hev been more useful ter me. Ez it is, I can't tell what is bein' said by them parties, an' they may hatch any kind o' scheme right hyar under my nose without my bein' any ther wiser. Thet's ther way them things goes."

He kept his eyes on the red-haired fat girl as she tapped the key in the careless professional way assumed by most telegraphers, and worked himself up into a frenzy of curiosity.

"Say," he blurted out at last. "What's ther reason yer don't write yer message down? Thet's er rule of ther company, I know."

The girl looked at him with a provoking smile.

"It seems to me that you know a great deal about this business. Perhaps you will come here and take this message and answer it. I can tell by your looks that you are a good telegraph operator. It will be a charity to help me out, as you are here, for I am tired and nervous and all upset."

She looked hard into Abe Kimball's eyes, still with that exasperating smile playing about her mouth and wrinkling up her fat double chin.

"Here's something more coming," she continued. "Just write this down, will you? Here's a pad of paper and a pencil right by my side. I'll tell him to go ahead."

She tapped something more on the instrument, and a reply came back at once.

"Got that?" she asked, as she turned toward Abe, who had taken the pencil in his hand in an uncertain way, but without attempting to write.

"Now, see hyar, you know I can't understand this cussed instrument, an' you air jist bluffin' me. But thar's some funny business goin' on hyar, an' it won't be healthy fer you if you try ter fool me," shouted Abe, who was now in a great rage.

"I'm not trying to fool you," she answered quietly, as the tapping of the instrument stopped and she closed the key.

"Wal, then, what wuz yer goin' ter tell me jist now when thet thing began to click? You said, 'Ther explanation is jist this,' an' then thet thing begun its noise, an' you didn't finish," persisted Abe.

"Oh, yes, to be sure. I was going to say that the explanation was that Silas Sloper is my brother!"

Abe Kimball looked at her in astonishment. Then he drew a long breath, turned around on his heel, and ran down the stairs.

'Mandy went to the window and saw that he had mounted his horse, which was just visible in the faint glow of the new moon, and without looking back had dashed away in the direction of the Devil's Canyon.

CHAPTER XV.

A MILE A MINUTE.

The reader may wonder where Otis Garland was during all the excitement. The last seen of him was when he took a pistol from Keno Kit and prepared to take a hand in the fight.

Then followed the struggle between the other people in the room, and Otis seemed to be forgotten.

But he wasn't. When Jim Brill ran up the track, with the detective following him on his black stallion, Jim had Otis Garland firmly in his clutches. A lariat such as is used by the cattlemen in the West had been lying in the corner of the signal-house, and Jim was quick to see it. As soon as the fight began, Jim's chief idea was to get the boy into his power again. He had plenty of courage, rascal as he was, and he would rather have been killed by Keno Kit right there than to let the boy escape, with all the profit that his death would be to him.

So when Keno Kit came at him he first threw the noose of the rope over the head of Otis and drew it tightly, as it confined his arms to his side and rendered him helpless.

All through his struggle with the detective Jim Brill retained his hold on the end of the lariat, which he had twisted two or three times around his wrist, and when at last he saw his opportunity to make for the door and get down the stairs on his way to the train, he pulled the boy with him with a jerk that nearly dragged the prisoner off his feet.

Otis tried to cry out, but he needed all his breath to follow his captor, and he was unable to utter more than a slight gasp, which was drowned in the hubbub of the fight.

In the darkness, Keno Kit did not perceive Otis running along several yards behind Brill, and he was utterly unconscious that the lad had left the signal tower at all.

When Abe Kimball left the room, therefore, Mandy Perkins found herself alone, with nothing but the still tumbled up condition of her little office to remind her of the excitement that had prevailed so short a time before.

She sat on her chair, with a mirror before her, and tried to arrange her badly-rumpled hair. It was a long task, and Mandy found that she had been scratched in the face and that her clothes were torn rather more than she liked.

"I shall have to see what I can find to put on. This dress is not fit to be seen, and there is a rule of the company that their telegraph operators must always look neat. I am a neat-looking object, sure enough."

She routed behind her table, and then, as a thought struck her, she went to a cupboard opposite the door and poked in a large valise.

"Here's that dress I wore at the masquerade. It's rather short, and there are too many colors and spangles in it to look quite proper for a young woman in the business of watching a railroad station and sending telegrams, but it will have to do. This gown of mine is so torn that I can't wear it."

She went into the cupboard, and in a few minutes emerged in a red, white and blue frock, spangled and scalloped, that probably represented "Folly," or some similar mythical character.

"Hello! What's this?"

She held a great fluff of red hair in her hand, that was almost exactly the shade of her own.

"It's the wig that Mame Connelly wore at that same masquerade. I remember now, we went as the twin Sisters of Comedy, and she had to get a red wig to make her look like me."

She threw the red wig back into the cupboard, and then, as a call came from a little station about eight or ten miles up the road, she sat at the instrument and answered it, receiving the official information that "Freight train Number Nine has just passed, going north."

"I suppose the Gang are on that train. But it's no business of mine. Only I hope Silas won't get hurt. He's always getting into trouble of some kind, seems to me."

She closed the key of her instrument, and fell to admiring herself in her masquerade dress in the little mirror that stood before her.

She had been sitting thus for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and it seemed to her that she had fallen into a doze, when she awoke with a start to a sense of her surroundings and fixed her gaze on the glass.

Hardly had she done so when she uttered a shriek and fell senseless to the floor.

What had she seen?

When she recovered, which she did under the influence of a pitcher of water dashed into her fat face, her first words, uttered in an awe-stricken, hoarse whisper, were:

"A ghost! The ghost of Roland Bland!"

She was lying on her face on the floor, for as soon as the water touched her and she became partly conscious of herself, and where she was, she turned over, that she might bury her face in her arms and shut out the horror that she felt was before her.

She could hear a faint rustling, as of feet that were not of the solid nature of beings of this world, moving about the floor, and then she distinguished a flutter of papers and felt a cold blast on her neck that seemed to bring with it the vapors of the grave!

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" she murmured. "It's Roland Bland's ghost! Oh, won't some one save me?"

"You confounded idiot! Get out of this!"

The voice in which these words were spoken was certainly not ghostly, and the foot that gave her a rough kick was too material to belong to any spirit.

Still, she was too frightened to look up, in spite of a second, and a harder, kick.

"Oh, it is his ghost!" she moaned. "Oh, what shall I do?"

"I'll pour another pitcher of water down your back, and then you will know what to do."

To emphasize this threat, the speaker threw a few drops remaining in the pitcher upon the neck of the prostrate Mandy, causing her to move involuntarily, so that her face was upward and she could see who her visitor was.

As soon as her gaze rested upon his features, she scrambled to her feet all in a heap, and as she pushed back her disheveled hair she murmured: "For the land's sakes! Is that you?"

"If you weren't such a timid fool you would have known it ten minutes ago," was the ungracious response. "Are you aware that the wire between this place and the Maricopa mine has been tapped, and that the whole trouble this night is through that?"

It was Guy Bland that spoke, and he was frowning portentously at the fat, flurried Mandy Perkins. He was dressed neatly in his business suit, and his waxed mustache was much in evidence, while the whip in his hand and the spurs on the heels of his high, shiny riding boots indicated that he had come over from the mine on horseback.

As a matter of fact, Guy came over as soon as he discovered how he had been fooled by Keno Kit in the telegraph business, and was in a white-hot heat of rage, much as he tried to hide it.

The first thing that warned him of something being wrong was the impossibility of making connection with Maricopa. Then some of the workmen discovered the wires dragging along the ground among the trees, and it was not long afterward when the whole trick of tapping the wire was laid bare.

A few curses were distributed among the men, and then Guy ran back to his office, changed his clothes from the miner's apparel he wore to his usual

business suit, and, mounting his horse, rode hard to Maricopa.

He did not see what could be done now that Keno Kit and the others had such a start on him, but he knew that if he was to do anything he must go to Maricopa to do it. Hence his appearance in the signal tower, and Mandy Perkins's consequent scare.

Mandy was not a young woman of quick intellect, and it occupied some time to make her understand just what had happened to the wire and how it had disarranged Guy Bland's plans. But when it got through her head, she was willing enough to do all she could to help.

"There is only one thing to be done," said Guy, after a pause, during which he had been thinking deeply.

"What is it?" asked Mandy.

Guy Bland frowned at her for interrupting, and she became humbly silent on the instant, as Guy resumed:

"The train must be stopped at Phenix, so that I can have time to get there. That fellow, Keno Kit, is doubtless on the train with them, supposing that they got away on that train."

"Oh, I know they did," interrupted Mandy again.

"Do you? You're smart. It happens that I know it, too. I did not trust to your knowing anything. Well, I must stop the train at Phenix, in some way, so that I can have time to catch up with them there. I cannot let them engineer the business by themselves, or they will surely make a mess of it. I don't believe Silas Sloper and Jim Brill between them have as much sense as—as—as—you have."

"Thanks," murmured Mandy. "Land sakes! How complimentary you are."

"So," went on Guy, not noticing the interruption, "I must be there without fail."

"What am I to do?"

"This: Call up the operator at Phenixville, and tell him to hold the train at all risks, till further orders."

Mandy went to the instrument, and after five minutes of telegraphing, she turned around and said, calmly:

"He won't do it."

"Let me come there," shouted Guy. "I'll see whether he will do it or not."

He seated himself at the instrument and tapped vigorously. There came the answer, and then he sent another message.

He turned around to Mandy with a look of triumph, and said: "Do you see that? You heard what he said—that he would hold the train? I don't think he would be long in the employ of this company if he did not obey me. Now, I will get on my horse and run up to the roundhouse. I have no time to lose."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Bland?"

"I am going after them on a special engine. That is all. You sit at your key all night, and look out for anything that comes from Phenixville. If that fellow talks about not obeying my orders, just tell him that I shall be with him in an hour or two, and that it will be a bad job for him if that train is not there when I get there."

"All right, Mr. Bland."

Guy left the room after seeing that Mandy was sitting quietly at her key, and hustled up to the roundhouse, where there were two engines with a little steam up, as was the custom, in case of an engine being wanted quickly for any purpose.

There were two men lying asleep in the little shed used by the men for a waiting room, and a comfortable fire burned in a stove, for even in Southern Arizona the nights are chilly during most of the year, and this night there was a dampness in the air that made a fire decidedly comfortable.

"I want an engine," announced Guy, briefly.

"An' what wud yez be wantin' a engine fer?" asked one of the men, whose red curly hair and short nose would

have claimed him for an Irishman, even without his brogue.

"I am Guy Bland, the manager of the Maricopa Mine, and President of the Board of Directors of this road. Moreover, I have an order here, signed by the President of the railroad, authorizing me to take a special engine whenever I require it."

"Lemme see thot," demanded the Irishman.

Guy Bland gave the man an official paper, which he read carefully and slowly by the light of a lantern he took from the floor.

"Yis, thot's the Prsident's hond-writin', shure ez my name's Pete Daly. I'm t'inkin' yez'll hov t' hov th' engine. Hi, you, Dan. Kim out o' thot!"

He stirred up his companion as he spoke, and made him understand what was wanted.

The man who got up from the floor, where he had been fast asleep, was tall and stalwart, with great brown whiskers, that covered all the lower part of his face. His voice was gruff, and he spoke in the dialect of the native of the Far West.

"Whar's ther engine ez we air ter take?" he demanded.

"Faith, it's over beyant, wid de steam mekin' th' divil's own noise, ez if it knew thot it 'ud hov t' do some worruk afore long."

As he spoke, Pete Daly sailed over to the engine, with his companion, whom he called Dan, and who was the fireman, close at his side.

Ten minutes later the engine pulled out of the yard, and with a jump, in response to the touch of the engineer, who pulled the throttle open, got up good speed and rushed toward Phenix. In the cab, beside the engineer and fireman, sat Guy Bland, with his gaze fixed ahead on the dark track, eagerly watching for the first glimmer of the lights of Phenix.

"What time are we making?" he asked, after a pause, during which the fireman had been shovelling coal into the furnace industriously and the steam-gauge had showed a higher mark every instant.

"We did thot last two miles in less thon two minutes," answered Pete Daly, "an' now we hov a straight bit av track for five miles, we ought t' git th' old engine t' hump along at th' rate of sivinty-foive miles an' hour."

"Make her do it," said Guy Bland, briefly.

"Oi'll thry," answered Pete Daly, with equal brevity.

CHAPTER XVI. ONE ON ABE.

'Mandy had been sitting in her signal house for nearly half an hour after the departure of Guy Bland, thinking about what he had said to her, and wondering whether the "kid" at Phenix would call her up again, when some one threw an arm around her neck, and a woman's voice commanded her to keep quiet if she didn't want to be put out of her misery.

At the same moment the muzzle of a revolver—that she recognized at once, for she was familiar with firearms—was pressed against her cheek to emphasize the command.

'Mandy had plenty of courage, and she sat quite still for a few moments.

She had recognized the voice as that of Ruth Howard, and she felt her ire rising as if it would choke her at the impudence of this little girl from the Golden Glory saloon talking to her in this way.

She tried to break away from the grasp of Ruth, taking chances of being perforated by a bullet from the revolver at the same time.

But Ruth Howard did not fire. She could hardly fancy the idea of killing 'Mandy Perkins in cold blood, no matter how important it might be to take possession of the signal-tower—or, at least, of the telegraph instrument.

Placing the revolver in her belt, Ruth seized 'Mandy by the arms and wrestled her out of her chair. Then she tried to force her out of the doorway. 'Mandy resisted, and there was a battle-royal that lasted for perhaps five minutes.

Half an hour later there was an imperative knock at the door, and a stern-looking man, in a big overcoat and a broad-brimmed hat, who was evidently used to commanding, came into the room, and, glancing carelessly at the red-haired girl, who had resumed her seat at the telegraph instrument, said:

"How are things going here? I thought I saw some one come up here an hour ago, from the window of my house over yonder. I don't want strangers to come to see you during business hours. As the agent of this station, I should be responsible for anything that might go wrong, and I propose to stop anything like fooling, as sure as my name is Montgomery Smith."

"Thar's nothing wrong, Mr. Smith," answered 'Mandy, humbly.

"Well, who was that man I saw on the stairs some time ago?"

"My brother."

"Your brother? I didn't know you had a brother in Maricopa."

"Oh, yes—Silas Sloper. He's employed at ther Maricopa mine, whar Mr. Bland is superintendent."

"What was he doing here at two o'clock in the morning?"

Mr. Montgomery Smith asked this question in a decidedly offensive tone, and the operator could tell that he was suspicious that she was not telling the truth.

She swung around in her chair indignantly and looked Mr. Smith full in the eyes as she asked, scornfully:

"Do you think I am telling you a lie, Mr. Smith?"

Mr. Smith could not stand the challenge conveyed in the eyes of the girl, but he asked her, with a swift change of the subject that stamped him as a diplomatist:

"What's the matter with your face?"

"Toothache."

"How did you get it?"

"From the draughts in this wretched little office. I should think the company might have the chinks stopped up when a woman hez to work in it all night."

'Mandy's face was tied up in a big red handkerchief, that not only covered her cheeks, but her chin as well.

"I thought perhaps you'd been fighting," observed Mr. Smith, with a grin.

"I should like to fight with some one."

"I beg your pardon."

"You needn't. I was only talking to myself. I should not presume to address the manager in that way."

There was covert sarcasm in this remark, but the manager evidently did not perceive it, for he responded, with ponderous gravity:

"I am glad to hear you say so."

As Mr. Montgomery Smith said this he moved toward the door, and, with a nod and a curt "good-night," he was gone.

For five minutes after he had disappeared 'Mandy sat quietly at the table, with her hand caressing the telegraph key.

Then she got up and stretched herself, and remarked:

"Wal, I guess thet thar gal won't be so fresh another time. She soon found out who was boss, anyhow. Hello! Who's this?"

She flumped down into her chair again, and had just assumed an attitude of careless industry, when the door opened again and Abe Kimball put his head in.

"I want to send a message," he said, curtly.

"What is it?"

"To Phenix."

"Write it."

Abe looked at the operator, and then sat down at the end of her table, reaching for the telegraph blanks she passed

to him, and licking the end of the pencil before he began to write, as his custom was.

He wrote a few words and passed them to the girl.

"Kin yer read thet?"

"I guess so."

The girl read: "Christopher Vance, Phenix—Look out for Guy Bland. He's on your track.—Abe."

"You expect me to send this, eh?"

"Yes."

"And give away my friend?"

"Oho! So ther Black Oath Gang air yer friends, eh? Is thet what you mean?" growled Abe Kimball, with a ring of triumph in his tones. "I thought you'd give yerself away at last. Wal, Miss 'Mandy Perkins, I am afraid you'll hev ter go ter jail afore you're many days older, along with that precious brother of yours."

"Oh, you do?"

There was sarcasm in the tone of the speaker, that made Abe boil with indignation.

"If you were er man I'd give yer something to remember me by when yer talk to me in thet way," he said.

"Why don't yer do it, anyhow?"

"Send thet thar message and quit yer chinning."

Without another word, the operator obeyed, Abe Kimball watching her as she did so, as if he would detect her in a trick.

"Did yer send thet correct?" he demanded, as the girl concluded.

"Correct. Twenty-five cents."

Abe paid the money, and remarked casually: "I hev er sister-in-law ez could read thet cussed telegraph business ez easy ez you kin. I wish she wuz hyar now, an' I'd mighty soon see whether you was acting straight."

"Wal, now, what er pity she ain't hyar."

"What wuz thet other message you sent awhile ergo?"

"Message?"

"Now, don't be funny! You know what I mean."

"Mebbe I do, an' mebbe I don't."

"MP," sounded on the instrument, and the girl answered it at once in the usual way.

There was an interchange of clicks and taps, and then she looked up at Abe Kimball and said: "Ther feller at Phenix says thet he can't deliver thet last message, 'cause he doesn't know any sich feller ez Christopher Vance."

"Tell him he'll call fer it at ther office."

"I don't think he will."

"Never mind what you think. You tell ther Phenix feller what I say, an' do it without any more back talk!"

Abe Kimball had lost his temper completely now, and he looked daggers at the red-haired girl.

What would have been the outcome of the difficulty it is impossible to say, for at that moment the door burst open and, as Abe Kimball and 'Mandy Perkins each drew a pistol, another red-haired girl, exactly like the operator sitting at the instrument, except that the newcomer was dressed in a gaudy masquerade dress while the other wore the ordinary dress of 'Mandy, marched into the room, with her shock of red hair in the wildest disorder.

Abe Kimball looked from one to the other in a state of astonishment so comical that the girl at the table burst into a shout of merry laughter, while the newcomer scowled fiercely.

"Who ther devil air you?" demanded Abe of each one in turn.

"I am 'Mandy Perkins," exclaimed the girl who had just come in.

"And I am—"

At this instant the new 'Mandy Perkins tore the red handkerchief from her double with the toothache, and the double showed to Abe Kimball a face he knew very well, as she shouted in a paroxysm of mirth:

"Fooled yer thet time, Abe. Don't yer know Ruth?"

"Wal, I'm er coyote ef I didn't think thar wuz something wrong about your make-up," Abe declared, sheepishly.

"Wal, ther point is, what air yer goin' ter do with this young lady? I've licked her once ter-night ter keep her erway from this hyar instrument, an' I think we'd better watch her till them fellers git things fixed at Phenix."

"I think so, too," acquiesced Abe Kimball.

CHAPTER XVII.

KIT RUNS AGROUND.

When Keno Kit started his black stallion after the freight train that was just beginning to move, he realized that he had his work cut out for him. He knew he could depend upon Malcolm to do all that was possible for a horse. But if the engineer of the freight should take it into his head to put on a spurt, there would be little chance of his ever catching him, and he did not want to make his horse gallop the whole twenty miles to Phenix.

"Now, Malcolm, old fellow, let us see what you're made of," he whispered, as he shook the reins over the stallion's neck, and touched him gently on the flank with his quirt.

The horse seemed to understand the words, even better than the movement of the reins and the touch of the quirt, for he uttered a whinny that was almost human, and dashed up the track at a speed which was as great as many a horse could muster at the very extreme of his power.

A stern chase is a long chase, and so it proved to the detective, for the train kept at just about the same distance from him as he ran mile after mile after the red lights that he could see on the last car of the flying freight.

"Keep it up, Malcolm. You will make it if yer don't git tired," whispered the detective to his noble animal.

The train did not get any further away from him, as he dashed along the side of the track, on the open prairie, and he had little doubt that he would catch up to it before it reached Phenix unless something unexpected should happen.

After half an hour's hard riding Keno Kit was satisfied that he was gaining slightly, and, in the moonlight, he could distinguish the outline of the cars, and could even see the iron ladder on the rear of the last car.

"Hurry, now, Malcolm!" he whispered, touching his horse again lightly with the quirt.

Inch by inch, and foot by foot, he gained on the train, and at last he prepared to carry into effect the plan he had.

Driving his horse close to the train, so that he was abreast of the last car, he drew himself up till he was kneeling on the saddle, after releasing his feet from the stirrups, and reached for the iron ladder on the end of the car.

Getting a firm grasp of it, he pulled himself to the car, slipping off the saddle. Malcolm galloped by his side for a few yards, until he said, in a sharp, but low tone:

"Home, Malcolm!"

The sagacious animal, with a toss of the head, stopped, and then, coolly turning around, trotted away toward his home at the Golden Glory saloon.

"Thet horse hez more sense than Abe Kimball," remarked the detective to himself, as he drew himself to the roof of the car, and, stretching himself at full length, dropped into a doze with as much calmness as if he were in a comfortable bed.

"I hev them now, anyhow," thought Kit. "They'll find that they hev'n't everything their own way, though they may think they hev. I will be with them when they git ter Phenix, an' if I don't bring that Black Oath Gang ter time, an' spoil all their little plans, my name ain't Keno Kit."

There was a dozen miles more to be covered before Phenix was reached, for

the train had been running slowly, and the detective figured that it would take them an hour to reach Phenix at the present rate of speed.

He had dropped asleep, and was snoring so loudly that it was a wonder the engineer did not hear him, when another sound that made him start to a sitting posture came to his ears.

It was the thump of a locomotive pounding along the track, and it was just behind him.

As he looked along the track he saw it coming, a great fiery monster, puffing steam and smoke, and apparently beyond control.

"Hello! Hold on!" he bawled.

There was room enough between the train and the engine for the engine to slacken speed before it caught the train, but in an instant he saw what was the cause of the engine coming on in that headlong way, and it sent a shiver of horror through him.

There were no lanterns on the end of the train, and the engineer of the following locomotive had actually not seen the train!

This was the time that Keno Kit had to act quickly. He had noticed a red lantern on the front of the last car, but of course in such a position that it could not be seen by any one following the train.

That red lantern must be brought up if the engine was to be prevented from running into the freight and causing a smash-up that would be the end of his earthly career.

All this was the thought of an instant, and the detective's movements were as quick as his thoughts.

Like a flash he had let himself down between the two cars, and the next moment he was wildly waving the red lantern on top of the car.

There were shouts from the locomotive and then the grating of wheels held by brakes, with a flying off of sparks in a brilliant mass of pyrotechnics.

Answering shouts came from the cars beneath him. Then there was a jolt that threw the detective from the roof of the car, and the engine crashed into the last car of the freight train and sent a cloud of splinters over the prostrate detective.

"Phenix!" yelled somebody.

Sure enough, just as the locomotive on which Guy Bland had been chasing the train caught up with its game the train and engine both rolled into Phenix, and the time for another test of strength between the Black Oath Gang and Keno Kit had arrived.

When the detective recovered his senses, which had been pretty well knocked out of him by his rather dangerous fall from the roof of the freight car, there was not one of the Black Oath Gang to be seen anywhere.

"Who was on the train?" he asked of the station agent—who was none other than the "kid" with whom Mandy Perkins had been quarreling by telegraph.

"No one except the train crew. What do you think?" demanded the station agent—a remarkably fresh young man.

Keno Kit felt a little shaken by his tumble from the car, but he was not disabled. So he took the fresh young man by the collar and gave him a swing to and fro that brought that gentleman's ideas into a chaotic state in which they were liable to put forth the truth, if possible.

"What are yer doing this to me for?" he demanded, breathlessly. "You cow-punchers and miners come to Phenix an' think you own the town. I'll have the marshal after you."

"Oh, you will. Well, look at this," said Keno Kit, sternly, as he showed his badge of authority from the United States, as well as one giving him the marshal's authority in Maricopa county.

"Oh, you are a policeman, are you? Then I beg your pardon," said the young man humbly.

"Wal, then, tell me what you know."

"All right. Thar wuz four men on one of them cars, an' one of 'em seemed ter be er prisoner. One of ther men had a funny high hat on, and when I asked him whar he wanted to go all he could say was, 'Yea, verily.'"

"Silas Sloper!" muttered Kit.

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Well, as soon as the engine struck, these four men came tumbling out of one of the cars and got around to the other side. You see, there is the river here, and some one had opened the drawbridge. So it was a fortunate thing in one way that the smash came. If the engineer had not stopped his train he would have gone over into the water. As it was, he pulled up and the engine behind slapped into his train."

The detective's eyes were roaming about as the young man talked, and now there came a gleam of astonishment, as he saw walking toward him with perfect coolness no less a personage than Guy Bland, in all his well-dressed and mustache-waxed eloquence.

"Good morning, Mr. Vance. I believe we have met before."

"I believe ez we hev," answered the detective, politely. "What are you doing in Phenix, Mr. Bland? I believe I saw you at Maricopa pretty late last night."

"Very likely. You were up pretty late yourself, weren't you?"

"Yes, rather. Good-morning."

"Good-morning," and Guy Bland walked away, with a smile on his lips that irritated the detective beyond measure.

"That skunk hez ther key ter this whole thing," he muttered. "I hed proof of thet last night by the telegraph wire, but he's too smart to give himself away. Still, I think Keno Kit is equal ter anything he kin bring ter bear on ther matter. I'll try ter keep my end up, anyhow."

So saying Kit walked toward the hotel at the station, where there was a big knot of men congregated, all looking at the smashed car, and exchanging speculations as to how the engineers could have been so "durned foolish" as to run into each other on a clear track.

"Now, what I hev ter do is ter see thet they don't git erway from Phenix without my knowin' it," muttered Keno Kit, as he strolled into the hotel and looked at the motley crowd assembled there. It was just about dawn, and the host, with his assistant, was busy getting breakfast for his guests.

Kit had a faculty for sleeping with one eye open, as it were, so, disregarding the many inquiring looks that were cast at him by the loungers, he took a chair by the stove in one corner of the room and appeared to drop into a slumber.

Guy Bland stepped into the big bar room from an adjoining apartment, and looked over at Keno Kit significantly.

"Who's ther stranger?" he asked of the landlord's assistant, a good-natured looking young fellow.

"Faith, it's none o' me bizness who it is, nor yures nayther. Oi niver ask who th' guests are, an' betoken Oi don't git told no lies."

Guy frowned momentarily, but it was not his game to quarrel with anyone who might be of use to him, so he passed it off with a careless smile, and strolled over to the stove, seating himself opposite Keno Kit.

"Mr. Vance, I believe?"

Kit remained perfectly still. Kit knew too much about things in general to snore, and thus overdo it. He wanted Guy to suppose that he was asleep, and considering that he had been up all night, it was not such an extraordinary thing to happen.

"I don't trust him," muttered Guy. "But he may be asleep, too. You can't tell."

He sat for ten minutes quietly looking

at the detective, and then the landlord proclaimed that "ther grub is on. Git at it, you fellers."

This was his courteous way of announcing breakfast, and the cow-punchers and others sat down and attacked the fried pork, fried mush and coffee with an appetite that spoke well for the healthful effect of the wild lives they led.

Keno Kit looked up with a start that was a good simulation of a man awaking suddenly. He stretched himself as he looked swiftly about him, strolled over to the table and ate with a relish, while Guy, on the other side of the table, kept his eye on the detective.

It was like two gladiators, sizing up each other preparatory to beginning a battle to the death.

There was nothing to be seen of Jim Brill and his companions, and yet Keno Kit felt confident that they had not got out of the town. He looked at the landlord, a tall, fibrous sort of man, with about as much expression in his face as in the hat that slouched over his forehead, and Kit wondered whether he was honest or not.

For a long time Kit scrutinized the countenance of the landlord, and the result of his speculation was that the man was not smart enough to beat the detective in a game of wits.

"He may be er rogue, an' he may be er honest man. My idea of it is thet he's nothin' more than er blamed fool."

Having settled it thus in his mind Kit reached for another lump of fried pork, and half a pound of fried mush, and paid strict attention to the business of the table.

"It's a foine appetite ye hov av yer own," observed the Irishman, quietly, as he gave Kit another mug of coffee.

Kit looked up, and saw that the man was regarding him with a friendly expression, and that his remark had evidently been meant in the best and kindest spirit.

"What do they call yer aroun' hyar?" asked Kit, as he took his coffee.

"Desmond O'Brien."

"That's er good name," observed Kit. "I allers like an Irishman with an O."

"An' faith, why shouldn't yez? They's the best av th' breed, be jabbers, an' come straight from a loine ov kings, so they do."

"Whar wuz yer raised?"

"Down East."

"Air yer willin' ter make er honest dollar?"

"Shure, Oi'll mek twinty av 'em, if they's t' be med."

"Then meet me after breakfast on the other side of ther track, an' I'll talk ter yer," said the detective, as he took his mug of coffee, and began drinking it carelessly.

Guy Bland looked at him suspiciously across the table, but had been unable to determine whether or no there had been any conversation between Kit and the Irishman beyond that which might ordinarily take place between a waiter and a guest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SLIPPED UP.

It was broad daylight by the time the breakfast was over, and Kit strolled about the town of Phenix as carelessly as any stranger might do who was curious to see what kind of place it might be.

Not a sign could he see of any of the Black Oath Gang, and even Guy Bland had disappeared. This did not reassure Keno Kit, however, for he had had enough experience with the slick manager of the Maricopa mine to know that when he was not to be seen was the time at which he might be expected to be in mischief.

"Thet feller is at ther bottom of this hyar whole thing, I know," thought Keno Kit, "and I shall catch him in it when I catch the rest of the gang—as I mean to do before I quit this hyar trail."

Kit strolled about, but took care that his peregrinations led him always in the direction of the other side of the railroad track.

"Phwell, stranger, phwat's th' game?" asked a voice, that he recognized as that of Desmond O'Brien.

"Who air those fellers down thar in ther hollow?" asked Keno Kit, as he peeped over a ridge crowned with bushes, and saw that the little dip in the land across from the railroad track was tenanted.

"Be th' powers, Oi belave ez you're roight, an' thot there is some one down in that place," answered the Irishman. "Oi niver saw thim afore nayther."

The hollow was tangled with furze, and there was a small thicket of pines on one side. In that thicket, Keno Kit had caught a glimpse of a slouch hat. It was only momentary, but he was positive that he had seen it.

He dropped flat upon the ground, and motioned to Desmond O'Brien to lie by his side. Then he said, quietly:

"There air four men down thar thet I hev ter ketch. I'm an officer of the United States Secret Service, an' I'm marshal of Maricopa County. Hyar's my badge an' commission."

He showed his badge and a paper that he took from an inside pocket of his shirt, and Desmond took off his hat respectfully as he gazed upon them.

"Shure Oi allers show rispict t' th' Prisident av th' United Shtates," he said, in explanation. "O'im a good American citizen, so Oi am, an' ye kin hov all Oi got so long ez yure in th' employ of Uncle Sam."

"Thet's ther talk."

"Yis, Oi'll tell ye how it wuz. Me wages here is twinty dollars a month, an' last month, whin Oi got me money it wuz in four foive dollar gold-pieces. Well, Oi had jist got me money, an' Oi wuz thinkin' ez Oi'd buy me a new pair av boots, which I stood much in nade ave, when along comes a murtherin' shpalpeen, an' sez, sez he: 'Hov ye th' change fer a twinty-dollar gold piece?' sez he. 'I hov thot,' sez Oi. 'Phwere is it?' sez he. 'Oi hov it here,' sez Oi. Wid thot, I guv him me four foive-dollar gold pieces, an' he gives me fer it a brass twinty, an' Oi hov it yit, an' divil a pair av new boots hov Oi got fer me throuble."

As Desmond O'Brien concluded this pathetic tale, he raised his head so that he could look over the bluff, and then sprung to his feet with a howl of rage.

"What's ther matter?"

"Shure there's the rascal thot shtole me money. Oi didn't know him at first in thot high hat, an' thot way he hez of sayin' 'Yea, verily!' but he's jist taken off his hat, an' Oi'd know him among a thousand now."

"Then come on," was all the detective said, as he leaped over the brow of the hollow, and rushed down into the little valley with Desmond close at his heels.

As they ran down the hill, the sharp crack of a revolver rang out from the clump of pines, the bullet passing so close to Keno Kit's cheek that it actually cut off a lock of his long hair that hung over his ears.

"Ther rascals air gittin' desp'rate now, but it won't help them, for I'll take them now, no matter what happens."

He drew his own revolver as he spoke, and he was pleased to see that Desmond had also taken his six-shooter from his holster, that hung under his sack coat, unobtrusively.

"I didn't know fer sure whether you carried er gun, Desmond," he remarked, with a smile, as the two dashed toward the clump of pines.

"Indade Oi do, an' Oi kin use it whin there is prisint occasion. Divil fear me!" answered the Irishman, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Luk out! Oi'm goin' ter drap thot felly wid th' ploog hat," continued Desmond, as Silas Sloper came out of the

thicket, and with a quick glance behind him, began to ascend the hollow on the other side.

Desmond had leveled his gun, but just as he pulled the trigger, the detective hit up the barrel, and the bullet sped harmlessly over the high hat of Sloper.

"Phwat's th' matter wid yez? Shure Oi hed him kivered jist ez noice ez anything ye iver saw," exclaimed Desmond, angrily.

"Thet's all right. But don't yer see he's carryin' somebody on his shoulder?"

"Phwell, phwat av it? Shure, wouldn't it be ez good ter knock over two av th' rascals at one shot ez wan? So long ez you are a United States officer, I kin kill th' whole bilin' av th' rascals, an' thin not be caught up in jail fer it, Oi s'pose."

"Thet boy ez bein' carried on thet feller's shoulder is my friend, an' his life is wuth thousands an' thousands of dollars to himself and to me."

"Bedad, thin, Oi'm glad Oi didn't pepper him," responded Desmond, as the two dashed into the thicket, and saw that there were two other men flying up the bank on the other side.

Keno Kit had not calculated on the obstacles that he now found in his path. As soon as he got fairly into the thicket he was in a maze of underbrush and fallen logs, that were so disposed as to make it impossible to follow the fugitives in a straight direction.

"Did ye see thot now?" exclaimed Desmond. "Th' shpalpeens hod it all fixed so thot we couldn't follow 'em, an' these pesky logs an' things ez are spread over th' ground is jist loike a castle around 'em, ez shure ez my name is Desmond O'Brien."

Keno Kit was not the man to waste time in vain regrets. He saw that the gang had got the best of him, and that the only thing to be done was to go back and make a detour of the valley, to get to the other side.

"We'll go around on this side," he said to his companion.

"Ye wull? Well, now, ye wull not, Oi'm thinkin', fer there is a river ez comes along there, an' cuts aff the path so thot ye can't git by. An' on th' ither side there is a swamp deep enough t' drown yez."

"Wal, what in thunder air we t' do, then?" demanded the detective somewhat impatiently.

"Oi'll show ye. Ye wull hov t' go around th' ither side av th' town, way back on th' railroad track a piece. Thin ye kin skirt th' shwamp, an' if ye are lucky, ye can catch up wid them fellys afore they's got very fur. Oi guess they mane t' go be way av Tip Top, to Prescott, an' then East be way av th' Santa Fe road."

"I guess you air right. Did yer see whether any of ther men wuz carryin' anything ez looked like baggage?"

"Yis. They had two bags full of something, and a bundle done up in paper."

"They air carrying about fifty thousand dollars' worth of bogus with them ter git put out in Chicago. That's what it means," said the detective, quietly.

"Wal, I hope they hov my good twinty wid them, for Oi'd like t' get my boots, sometime," observed the Irishman, sadly.

"I promise yer thet you shall hev yer boots, anyhow," said the detective, smiling, in spite of himself at the poor fellow's anxiety over his boots. "But I want yer ter help me take these fellers in. It will be er good thing fer you cause Uncle Sam allers pays them ez works fer him."

"Oi'd do it if Oi didn't git a cint. Oi'm an American citizen, an' you kin bet Uncle Sam don't hov t' ask me twice t' do anything."

There was a heartiness in the Irishman's tone that told how much in earnest he was, and Keno Kit patted him on the back approvingly.

The two men skirted the town, and had just reached the station on their

way around, when the young man in charge of the telegraph office came out and waved his hand to Kit.

"Thar is somethin' in his hand, an' I guess it's er telegram," remarked the detective. "I s'pose I'd better go an' git it, although I hate ter go out of my way, an' p'raps lose them fellers."

"It might be somethin' important," suggested Desmond O'Brien, who had the greatest respect for telegrams.

In ten minutes Keno Kit held a message in his hand, and as he tore open the envelope he looked keenly at the operator, and asked:

"Hez any one seen this hyar besides you?"

"Who should have seen it?" was the response.

Keno Kit did not reply in words, but he glanced significantly in the direction of the signal office, at the foot of the stairs of which Guy Bland was standing, puffing a cigarette, and apparently deeply interested in the prospect down the railroad track.

"No, sir. That man, Mr. Guy Bland, has not seen your message, and he could not see any message that comes over the wires to me. I never allow a stranger in my office, and as for Guy Bland, I don't like him, and he is the last man I should allow in my place."

The young man spoke so emphatically that Keno Kit was inclined to believe him, although he would have given a great deal to know what had brought Guy Bland to that spot at that particular moment.

"Hello! What's this?" he muttered, as he read the few words on the paper. "I s'pose I'll hev ter do what it sez, but it's er pity at this hyar moment."

The message read: "Don't leave Phenix till you see me. I'll be with you by noon.—Abe."

The detective had a good, serviceable silver watch in the recesses of his clothing that he did not often show, but that he always kept in case of his requiring to know the time particularly. He referred to the watch now and saw that it was half-past eleven.

"Desmond!"

"Phwell?"

"We can't go after them fellers now."

"All roight. Phwativer you say. But remimber I'm wid yez."

"I know that. I think ther best thing you kin do now, however, is ter go back ter th' hotel, an' keep quiet till I need yer. Will you come then?"

"Indade Oi wull. Oi'm me own master all day, anyhow, fer Oi'm supposed t' be ashlope now, an' I don't go on till noight, at nine o'clock. Yer know th' boss hez a theatre where there is singin' an' dancin' an' other didoes, an' Oi hov t' be there t' see thot th' cow-poonchers kapes ordher. Th' byes gits frisky betoimes, an' thin Oi hov t' bounce 'em."

Desmond O'Brien said this in such a business-like way that Keno Kit smiled again, and Desmond smiled, too, in sympathy, as he walked toward the hotel, and straight to his bed in his little room over the bar.

CHAPTER XIX.

A JUGGLE WITH DEATH.

It was ten o'clock at night after the incidents narrated in the last chapter, and the vaudeville theatre of the landlord of the hotel at Phenix was a scene of liveliness and gaiety, as usual.

The theatre was a long room at the back of the barroom, and if could be entered either that way or directly from the street by a long hallway, in the middle of which was a little hole in the wall, through which tickets were sold, the ticket seller being in a fenced-off space in the barroom, selling tickets alternately to the men who went to the theatre through the barroom, and the others who reached it by the hallway.

The ticket seller was the landlord himself, for he would not trust any one else, and the rule "No free list" was

strictly observed. There were no passes to any one to the theatre, with the single exception of the Phenix Gazette, the newspaper that was supposed to come out once a week, but that really appeared whenever Colonel Smith, the editor, felt inclined to publish it.

"I guess thet's bout all ez we'll git ter-night," observed the landlord to the Colonel, as the editor strolled into the barroom, and nodded to the landlord. "Desmond!"

"Phwell?" responded the Irishman, who had just made his appearance from the street.

"Keep yer eye on things, an' don't let any one through without a ticket. Onderstand?"

"Divil fear me," returned Desmond, briefly and significantly.

Keno Kit was seated at the back of the hall, looking at the stage on which a soubrette of the regular pattern was holding forth in a comic song that evidently pleased the audience.

"I wonder whar Abe is?" muttered the detective, as he puffed calmly at his cigar, and looked about him. "He came this afternoon, an' told me ter keep me eyes open. Then he went erway. I s'pose I kin trust him, anyhow."

"Hello, Kit," said a voice in his ear, and Abe Kimball, neat in dress, with his white shirt and diamond pin all in evidence, but a broad slouch hat on his head, seated himself at the table, and looked critically at the stage.

The soubrette had finished her song, amid a storm of applause, and a small shower of gold pieces flung by some enthusiastic miners in a private box. She came back to the stage to pick up the coins, and then bowed herself off to make room for two "burnt-cork artists," who sang in hoarse voices, and knocked each other down, and hit each other with walking sticks, and told chestnuttty jokes to each other, as song and dance men do everywhere.

Keno Kit glanced at them carelessly, and turned to see whether Desmond O'Brien had come into the theatre, when a peculiar odor of grease-paint, such as is used by performers to paint their faces, made itself known in his vicinity, and he saw that the soubrette, in her stage costume, had coolly seated herself at his table, between himself and Abe Kimball.

"Wal?" said Kit, inquiringly.

"That's all right, friend. I suppose you don't object to a lady sitting by your side for a few minutes to look at the show, do you?"

There was defiance in the girl's tone, but it bore a certain refinement that was not usual among the performers in a variety theatre of this character. Keno Kit did not answer for a moment, but he peered into her face with a directness that might have been embarrassing to a lady with less assurance.

"You kin sit hyar ef yer like, of course," he said, slowly. "But why do you pick out my table, when thar are plenty of others, whar you might find better company?"

"This company does me all right," she answered coolly. "But I can tell you that singing in a place like this, with so much tobacco smoke makes one's throat dry. I should like a glass of lemonade."

"You won't lose nothin' by askin' fer it, anyhow," laughed the detective, as he signed to one of the waiters moving about among the company with eager eyes.

"What do yer want?" asked the waiter, in his usual surly tone.

"Bring this lady a glass of lemonade."

"What do yer want yerself? I s'pose yer don't mean ter make ther lady drink alone, do yer, stranger?"

Keno Kit's blue eyes flashed fire for an instant, but he only answered, quietly:

"Guess you're right. Bring me some lemonade, too. Abe, what'll you have?"

"Lemonade," answered Abe, promptly.

"Lemonade!" repeated the waiter, disdainfully. "All right! Three lemon-

ades. You air great sports, ain't yer, with yer lemonade?"

The surly waiter did not wait to see what response would be made to his remarks, but shuffled away to get the beverage.

Hardly had he gone when the soubrette placed her hand on Keno Kit's arm, and whispered hurriedly:

"Do you mean to take the Black Oath Gang to-night?"

Keno Kit repressed his inclination to start, and puffed at his cigarette as if he did not care to answer.

"Do you hear what I say?" asked the woman, eagerly.

"Yes, but I do not know what you mean."

"You are Keno Kit, known all over these parts as the Arizona Detective, I know."

"You know it, eh?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Who told yer?" asked Keno Kit, with provoking calmness.

"I do not need to be told. I know it."

"You do, eh? And what of it, even if I was Keno Kit, which I do not admit."

"I thought you had more sense, and here you are wasting your time in lying to me. Oh, what fools men are!"

There was a bitter scorn in the girl's tone that was rather hurtful to Keno Kit's pride, and he took his cigarette out of his mouth, and rolled it between his fingers, as he looked at the girl with more interest than he had shown hitherto.

"What are you driving at, my girl?"

"Just this. I know why you are in Phenix, and I tell you that unless you are a sharp man, as well as a brave one, you will not leave this theatre to-night alive!"

Abe looked at the girl as she made this declaration, and saw that she was actually trembling with earnestness.

"You are not going to commit murder, are you?" he asked, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. The girl turned on him swiftly, and hissed:

"You need not be funny, either, Abe Kimball, for you are on the death-list, too."

Abe blew a cloud of cigarette smoke into her face, as he retorted, coolly:

"Thar can't be any death-list business with me without me taking a hand, too. I've been on death-lists afore, but yer see, I'm still alive."

"Hyar's yer lemonades," interjected the tough waiter, at this moment, and the three glasses were placed before them.

The girl pulled one of the glasses toward her, but the waiter put out his hand and intercepted it, pushing forward another glass in its place.

"This hyar's your liquor, Mamy. It's not quite so strong ez that other, an' it'll agree with yer singin' voice better."

"All right, Dan."

She took the glass he offered, and raised it to her lips, while Keno Kit paid for the lemonade, and gave the waiter a good-sized coin as a tip.

The waiter relaxed a little of his surliness in response, and walked away, after winking significantly to the girl, which wink Keno Kit caught in transit, although the waiter did not know it.

"What er pleasant feller thet is," observed Kit, lightly.

He took one of the glasses of lemonade, and was about to raise it to his lips, when the girl, by a dexterous movement, overturned it, so that its contents were all spilled on the floor, but without enough disturbance to be noticed by anyone save those at this table.

Keno Kit raised his eyes inquiringly, and the girl answered the unspoken question with a nod.

"Just what I expected," said the detective, coolly. "Abe, I don't think you are very thirsty."

"Not very," agreed Kimball, with a peculiar smile.

The detective emptied the glass into a

cuspidor that stood conveniently near, and the girl sipped her own lemonade with an air of satisfaction that made the detective long for a drink himself.

"They do these things in er very clumsy way around hyar," observed the detective. "When thet feller changed ther glasses it wusn't necessary ter tell me that some of thet thar lemonade wuzn't very healthy."

"Deadly poison," whispered the girl, sententiously.

"Wal, it won't poison ther spitbox, I guess."

Keno Kit had been in dangerous predicaments many times in his life, and this attempt to put him out of the way was only an amusing circumstance to him, in spite of the fact that he knew there were to be other means tried that night to put him out of the world.

A bell rang at the back of the stage, for the "burnt-cork artists" had long since finished their "turn," and there had been three acrobats and an Irish comedian on the stage since.

"That bell is for me," observed the girl. "I am to go on next, and sing three songs. Now, I have only one thing to say to you. Don't move from your chairs on any account till I come back—no matter what may happen. If you do, you will be dead men!"

With this warning, that was uttered in a whisper of intense earnestness, the girl made her way down the hallway at the side of the theatre to the stage, leaving Keno Kit and Abe Kimball in a state of mind the reverse of pleasing, in spite of their natural courage, and their feeling that they were well able to protect themselves against any ordinary foe.

There was nothing to suggest the necessity of the girl's mysterious words, so far, except the fact that poisoned liquor had been offered to Keno Kit and Abe Kimball.

"What do yer think of this, Kit?" asked Abe, after a pause, during which both had been puffing at their cigarettes.

"I don't think nothin' of it," answered Keno Kit, after a pause. "It was not ter be supposed that ther gang was goin' ter let us alone when they knew we was hot on ther trail. They'll try everything, an', of course, there's plenty of 'em watchin' us now."

"Will you oblige me? I have dropped something under your chair," said a polite voice just behind Keno Kit.

The detective turned quickly, but without moving from his seat, to see the smiling face of Guy Bland within a few inches of his own, while he pointed to the chair upon which Kit sat, as if asking him to rise.

"What is it?" asked the detective, coolly.

"It's—it's—Hello! Look out! There's a—"

As Guy exclaimed thus, in a loud excited tone, it happened that Desmond O'Brien came into collision with him, spilling a glass of beer down his neck.

"Faith, Oi begs yure pardon, sorr. Oi didn't see yerz. If ye'll kim intil th' bar-room, Oi'll woipe it aff. Oi'm quite dishtr'yed wid grief over th' trouble."

There was a twang of sarcasm in Desmond's tone that could hardly have been unobserved by so quick-sighted a man as Guy Bland, but he did not say anything. He simply withdrew, to the bar-room, with a malevolent glance at the Irishman, and without pretending that he had really dropped something under the detective's chair.

"That's one try, eh, Kit?" remarked Abe, with a smile.

"Thar'll be others, no doubt," returned Kit. "But I guess thet gal wuz right in warnin' us ter sit still. Thar she is now, on ther stage. She looks well, and she sings all right. I wonder who she is, and why she is takin' an interest in us?"

"I dunno, I'm sure," said Abe, as he smoked with an air of enjoying his cigarette immensely.

The girl on the stage was singing some trifling ditty about her love, who was a cashier in a dry goods store, but who "spent his money freely, he did now, really," but she kept her eyes fixed intently on the detective all the time, in spite of her waving her hands to different parts of the auditorium in a bewitching as well as impartial manner.

She ended her song, and Keno Kit applauded vigorously, more to show his good feeling toward the singer than because he thought her efforts worthy of encouragement.

She gave him a little smile as she went off into the wings, and Keno Kit made himself another cigarette.

The man at the piano, who formed the entire orchestra, played a prelude for her next song, and she came on with a swing that was much admired by the habitués of the theatre.

At that moment Keno Kit's gaze became riveted on an individual, who had entered by the side hall, and had strolled carelessly to the front of the auditorium, taking a seat near the stage.

"Do you see him?" whispered the detective to Abe Kimball.

"Who do you mean?"

But Keno Kit did not answer. His gaze was fixed upon the newcomer, who wore a peculiar plug hat and in whom, in spite of the fact that his face was turned toward the stage, he recognized no less a personage than Silas Sloper.

For an instant, Keno Kit kept his eyes fixed on the man, who was apparently careless whether he was seen or not. Then, with a cry of rage, muffled but unmistakable, Keno Kit tried to rise from his chair.

"Sit down!" commanded Abe Kimball, in a warning voice, as he forced the detective back into his seat.

"Thank heaven!" cried the girl, who had just come upon the stage, in so fervent a tone, that the audience, who thought it was in some way part of the entertainment, laughed uproariously and then burst into a salvo of applause.

But Keno Kit knew that he had only just escaped death!

CHAPTER XX.

A SCRAP IN THE DARK.

There was one satisfaction to the detective in seeing Silas Sloper in the theatre. It proved that one, at least, of the Black Oath Gang was still in Phenix, and that probably the other members, who were in the plot to do away with Otis Garland, were not far away.

Silas Sloper was doubtless aware of the presence of the detective, and his boldness in thus taking his place in the theatre where he knew he would be seen by Keno Kit, could argue only that he desired to be seen, and was prepared to take care of himself.

As this passed hurriedly through Kit's mind, Mame Ray continued her song on the stage, looking carelessly down at Silas Sloper as she did so, with a kind of recognition that was not unobserved by Abe Kimball, although Kit did not appear to notice it.

As the song drew to a close Keno Kit started, and again would have risen from his seat but for the restraining hand of Abe.

Two men strolled along the room, so near that the detective could have reached them in half a dozen steps, and each of the men, as he passed, looked at him with a sneer that seemed to say, "Why don't you come over here?"

The two men were Jim Brill and Pete Morrelli the Mexican.

"Abe!" whispered Kit.

"Well?"

"What do you make of this hyar?"

"Dunno. But I don't think er feller need be very smart ter see thet ther gang hev ther drop on us, or they wouldn't be so perky."

"I guess you're right."

"I know I am."

"Whar's that Irishman?" whispered Keno Kit.

"Here Oi am. Phwat do ye want?"

It was Desmond O'Brien who replied to the softly-uttered inquiry of the detective, and the speaker was right at his elbow, looking casually about the theatre as he uttered the words.

Mame Ray left the stage, but just before she did so, a small bunch of flowers was thrown to her, which she picked up with a bow of acknowledgment, showing, as she did so, that there was a note thrust among the blossoms.

"Did yer see who threw them flowers?" whispered Kit to Abe.

"I did. It wuz thet yaller brute, Silas. Don't yer think we'd better take risks, an' try ter corral ther gang right now?"

"You've been preventing my doin' it right along," returned Kit.

"I know it, but I begin ter wonder whether I ain't wrong."

Desmond O'Brien had moved away, and the detective had just observed that he was down in the front part of the hall, when a note, rolled up into a ball, was placed in the detective's hand.

He seized the paper and looked around quickly, but he could not see any one in the vicinity who would have been likely to give it to him. He looked at Abe Kimball, but that gentleman was busy rolling a fresh cigarette, and evidently had not noticed the paper at all.

The only other person in the neighborhood was Col. Smith, the editor of the Phenix Gazette, and he had dropped asleep under the influence of the music and the heat of the room.

"This hyar bizness beats my game," muttered Kit.

He opened the note unobtrusively, and read the two words it contained, in a woman's handwriting:

"Act now."

He saw that the writing was clear and firm, like that of a person who had learned to use the pen under advantageous circumstances, and that it was much better than most of the caligraphy that came under his notice in Arizona as the work of women of that region.

Without comment, however, Kit handed the note to Abe, who looked at it, and passed it back to the detective, with the quiet exclamation:

"All right. Let her go."

The question in Keno Kit's mind, and which he felt must be answered before he could do anything, was where could Otis Garland be.

He knew perfectly well that the stake the gang had in this young half-breed was as great as any that was involved in the sale of the bogus money they were trying to take East, and he felt that until he found the boy he could not hold the key to the situation.

As Kit looked about the hall, after coming to this conclusion, he was surprised to find that the three members of the Black Oath Gang had disappeared, and, further, that Guy Bland was not to be seen in the theatre.

The performance was still going on, although Mame Ray was not to be seen, and the crowd of miners and cattle men were enjoying the show in their own way.

"Thar's Otis," exclaimed Abe, suddenly.

There was a window, high up in the wall, on one side of the hall, arranged so that people could not stand outside and look in, and at this window Keno Kit saw the face of Otis Garland.

At the very moment that the detective looked toward him, his eyes met those of the boy, and Otis smiled gladly, and disappeared.

"Git!" whispered Keno Kit, and without a moment's hesitation he made for the door that led through the barroom, and thence to the outer air and darkness.

To run around to the side of the wooden building where was the window at

which he had seen Otis was the work of a very few moments.

"Otis!"

No answer.

"Otis, whar air yer? I am hyar—Keno Kit."

Still no answer, and the light that shone through the window was powerful enough to show him that there was no one at this side of the building, either friend or foe.

"Whar kin thet boy be?" he exclaimed aloud, unconsciously.

"Is it th' bye wid th' dark complect, ez looks somethin' loike an' Injun, ez yer mane?"

"Yes."

He had recognized the voice of Desmond O'Brien at once.

"Wull, thin, here he is, ez large ez loife, an' twice ez purty."

At the same moment a hand was thrust into his and gave it a hearty squeeze.

"Otis!"

"Kit."

The short greeting spoke a great deal, and would have convinced any listener that the man and boy were so glad to meet each other that they did not care to waste words.

"I'm mighty glad ter find yer, too, Otis," observed Abe Kimball, who had been close at the heels of the detective all the time, although Kit had been too much occupied to notice him.

The boy pressed the hand of Abe Kimball, but looked about him the while with a hunted expression, as if he feared to be seized by an enemy every moment.

"Whar air they, Otis?" asked the detective in a low voice.

"Right here, somewhere. I slipped away from them, and I was surprised that I could do it. I was on the stage, and the woman back there let me out of the dressing room, where they had me, and told me to get to you as quickly as I could."

"What woman?"

"Here is the woman," put in a feminine voice, as Mame Ray, in her brightly-colored stage dress, slipped out of a door that led to the stage and joined the group.

"Mame Ray?"

"Yes. Now, I want to give you a little advice. Get back to Maricopa as fast as you can, and don't try to catch the gang. If you do, it will mean the wiping out of the whole crowd here."

"Thanks fer yer advice, but tell me how it is you know so much about ther gang," said the detective.

He had turned to see that there was no one in the vicinity to overhear him, and when he swung around again the woman was gone.

"She's a queer critter," he said, with a smile. "But I don't think I will take her advice about not goin' after ther gang."

"She is one of ther gang herself, I believe," growled Abe Kimball, who had been a silent watcher of the mysterious interview with the woman.

"Oi don't think she is," remarked Desmond O'Brien. "Because thot gang hasn't been around here at all for months, an' Mame hez been regularly singin' in the t'eyter every night. She hezn't niver hed no mail, nayther, an' she's a purty square woman all t'rough. Oi know her ez well ez Oi know me grandmother."

"Follow me," commanded the detective, who was not particularly interested in Mame Ray's doings, and who was afraid that the members of the gang would escape him, after all.

He turned into the stage door, which swung open on the latch, and found himself in a small dark hall, that communicated with the stage, and in which there was generally a doorkeeper. It was empty now, and the detective led the way through a side door that took them into the main part of the hall.

Hardly had he reached the hall when

he found himself face to face with Jim Brill.

For as long as one could count six Brill and the detective faced each other in silence. Then Keno Kit drew his revolver and pointed it straight at the head of Jim Brill, uttering the short, stern command:

"Throw up your hands!"

For answer, Brill put his hands in his trousers' pockets, and smiled calmly into the face of Keno Kit.

"Ye dhirty spalpeen! Phwy don't ye t'row up yure honds when a gintleman tells ye?" shouted O'Brien, throwing himself bodily upon Brill, and throwing him to the floor.

"Yer blamed fool! What air yer doin'?" demanded Jim Brill, as he strove to get his hand to his pistol, but was prevented by the weight of the Irishman, that was upon him in a dead lump.

"Now, Otis, take thet sneakin' Greaser afore he kin do anything, boy. He's quite ready ter wipe out ther whole party, I kin see."

It was Abe Kimball who spoke, and he had seen, what had escaped the detective, that Guy Bland was leaning over a table a little way off, with his hand on the butt of the revolver that peeped from beneath his coat, ready to fire as soon as he should think it necessary.

Otis needed no second invitation. He seized the Mexican by the throat, and, being a stout young fellow ordinarily, he bore Pete Morrelli to the floor and held him utterly helpless.

"Whoop!" yelled a voice that Abe Kimball recognized as that of Silas Sloper.

"This hyar is gittin' hot," muttered Abe. Then, speaking to Kit, who had drawn his pistol, he said: "It ain't no use, Kit. They've been at yer gun, an' it ain't no more use than er stuffed club. They've drawn ther cartridges on yer. But they didn't git at mine! Look out!"

Abe saw Guy Bland deliberately point his revolver at the head of the detective, with an expression on his face that meant murder.

It was a time for quick action and Abe Kimball took it.

With one hand he pulled the detective almost to his knees, just as a bullet from Guy Bland's pistol whizzed over his head, and with the other he shot out the six lights that hung in the middle of the hall, leaving the place in darkness save for the row of footlights, which Keno Kit demolished with a sweep of his hand, smashing lamps in all directions.

"The meeting is adjourned!" announced the stentorian tones of Col. Smith between the bang-bang of revolvers that arose from all parts of the theatre, as the lights went out, and gave a tacit invitation to every one in the place to blaze away, and blow off their steam on general principles.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHICH WAS FOOLED?

There was a fusilade that lasted several minutes, for your Arizona man dearly loves an opportunity to use his revolver in a place that is not his own, and where he is not required to pay for the damage he does.

"Look out, now, Kit. This is a ticklish time," whispered Abe's voice in Kit's ear.

"Ther other side of ther bridge is ther place," responded the detective, as he tore himself loose from the clutch of the desperado, Jim Brill, and made for the door.

The detective was not afraid that the members of the gang would not follow, for he knew that the value of the boy Otis to them was too great to allow him to be taken from them, if they could help it, and that there would be an opportunity to catch the gang if they were once brought outside the theatre.

As Keno Kit and Otis made their way in the darkness to the other side of

the bridge, near the hollow in which the gang had taken refuge a few hours before, and through which Kit had found it impossible to follow them, Abe joined them, as unruffled as if he had just come from an aristocratic reception instead of a deadly melee in a variety theatre.

"Who's that woman?" asked Kit, suddenly, as the figure of a woman could be seen moving swiftly toward them.

"Mame Ray, of course," answered Abe.

Silently the woman joined the group and then it was seen that she had two bags and a bundle, which the detective recognized at once as the bogus money that Silas Sloper had been carrying about so carefully.

Without a word she placed it in the hands of the detective, and then, with a wave of the hand, ran back toward the theatre, where the racket could still be heard, although the glow of a window showed that the lights were being restored.

The detective wanted the bogus money, but that was not of so much consequence as to catch the gang, and he determined to go back as soon as he had placed Otis in a place of safety.

"What do you mean by that, Kit?" expostulated the boy, as the detective told him of his plan. "Don't you think I can do my share in capturing the gang?"

"You hev'n't been able ter do much so far, boy," answered the detective quietly.

"Because they had the drop on me. What could a boy, or a man, either, do, with a dozen yards of cord that would hold a bull, twisted about him?"

"Ther boy sez ther truth," put in Abe, with a nod of acquiescence.

"Now, see hyar, Otis," whispered the detective, as he placed his hand encouragingly on Otis's shoulder. "No one doubts thet you are clear grit right up ter ther handle. But yer can't kick ag'in er thing ez is too much for yer. These fellers don't mean ter give yer no show, thet's sartin, an' ef we hez er tussle with 'em, they'll give all thar attention to you. They wants ter wipe yer out, and ther only reason they ain't done it already is thet they knows they'd be swung ter a tree right erway if ther boys knew they had done it. So they want ter git yer ter some place erway from hyar, whar yer ain't known, an' whar thar wouldn't be likely ter be no interference."

"Thet's so, Otis. Kit is tellin' yer ther truth," put in Abe Kimball, quietly.

Otis did not object longer, but when Kit whispered something to Abe, and the latter said to Otis, "Come on," the boy followed him without a word to the spot where the broken freight cars lay on the railroad track, just out of the circle of light thrown from the signal office, where the young operator was keeping his nightly vigil, as usual.

In another ten minutes, Otis was stowed away in one of the cars, with the parcels of counterfeit money by his side, while Keno Kit went cautiously back to the theatre to reconnoitre.

There had been some stars out earlier in the night, but the sky was overcast now, and the darkness was pitchy in its blackness.

Keno Kit was moving along stealthily in the shadow of a great pine, that accentuated the darkness a little, when he plumped into a man coming from the theatre.

"Hello, Pete! Is thet you?"

Keno Kit recognized the voice as that of Jim Brill, and he answered without hesitation, in so low a tone that the other would not be likely to know his voice:

"Yes."

"Whar air they? Hev yer seen 'em?"

"No."

"Yer yaller brute! Yer seem ter be husky ternight. Wal, it ain't no wonder, p'raps, fer thar wuz an all-fired

sight o' powder burned in thet place. An' what in thunder hez become of Silas, I dunno. An' he hez all ther stuff, too."

Kit made no response, and Jim Brill went on:

"Come back ter ther stage, an' let us find out whar thet cussed Mame is. I hev an idee she guv us erway ter thet feller, Keno Kit, 'cause we hed ernough knock-out drops in thet thar lemonade of his ter kill three men, an' neither him nor Abe wuz hurt at all. I don't see how they could hev got erway with all that stuff, an' still be spry enough to git thet boy out of our hands. It's too much fer me."

"Of course," growled the detective.

"Why of course?" hissed Jim Brill. "What do yer mean by thet, yer slack-baked Greaser? Say er thing like thet ag'in, an' I'll paste yer with ther barrel of my gun."

The detective was discreetly silent, but if Jim Brill had known how near he was to being "pasted" with Keno Kit's gun, he would have been surprised.

"Hello! Thar she is now?" suddenly broke out Jim Brill, as a female figure tripped across the open space at the side of the theatre. "Whar is she goin'?"

He ran out toward the woman and seized her by the arm.

"Whar air yer goin', Mame?" demanded Brill.

She pointed toward the track, where the cars were piled up in a heap.

"What's over thar?"

"Keno Kit. He and the rest of his crowd are all in there, asleep. They have the boy with them, and they don't care anything more about the Black Oath Gang to-night. I heard Keno Kit say that he would get you all in the morning."

"Oh, he did, eh?" hissed the other, savagely. "We shall see."

"Mebbe!" muttered Kit, almost audibly.

Jim Brill's ears were very sharp, and he turned quickly on the detective, with:

"What's thet you say, you blamed Greaser? I tell you, when this hyar job is over, an' you hev your share of ther swag, I don't want yer in my company any longer. You hear thet, now?"

Keno Kit bowed his head in silence, while his fingers itched to seize the rascal by the throat, and pay him out for all his acts right there and then.

It was too dark for Jim Brill to distinguish the features of the detective, of course, but he could make out that he bowed his head, and that soothed Brill's dignity. Then he went on, resuming his remarks:

"You say they air in thet car, over thar, eh, Mame?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now I'll let you come with us ter show us whar ther place is. I s'pose you kin be trusted, ez much ez any woman. But I ain't got much faith in ther sex, I tell yer."

"Too bad!" muttered the detective.

This time he spoke so low that Jim Brill could not be certain that he had said anything, although he looked at the supposed Mexican for an instant with a burning glance that would have been effective, no doubt, had there been light enough to see it, and had Keno Kit been Pete Morrelli. In the absence of both these requisites, however, the fierce glare of Jim Brill was rather wasted.

The woman led the way in the darkness, with Jim Brill, and the detective, in his character of the Mexican, close behind her.

They reached the train, which had been so badly strained in the collision, with the remains of the locomotive still lying behind it.

There had been some work on the wreck, but not much had been done so far, and the broken freight cars still presented a rather sad appearance, even in the gloom of the night.

Two or three cars at the end of the

train had been more or less broken, but most of the train was uninjured, so far as could be seen.

Straight to a car in the middle of the train went the woman, pointing to the closed door of one of the cars.

Jim Brill understood the meaning of the sign, and, as he felt for his revolver, he stole close to the door and listened.

"Open the door," suggested the woman.

Jim Brill had partly drawn his pistol from its case, but he replaced it now, and stooped with his head close to the door of the car.

Suddenly, Kit sprung upon the desperado, and, after a short struggle, had him lying flat on his back, with his knees on his chest.

"Cuss yer! What does this hyar mean?" gasped Jim.

A stream of light fell full upon the detective's face at this moment, from the doorway of the signal office, that had been flung open, and the detective smiled contentedly, as he looked into the eyes of the discomfited desperado, and observed:

"Wal, ther boys call me Keno Kit, ther Arizona Sport."

"Fooled!" hissed Brill.

"I'm afraid so, Jim," responded Kit, airily. "Thar is only one thing I want ter say ter yer now, which is thet I don't want no man ter mistake me fer such er skunk ez thet thar Greaser, Pete Morrelli. It's ther first time I've ever been taken fer a Mexican, even in ther dark!"

"Mame, whar's ther boys?" cried Jim Brill, as he squirmed in his endeavor to get hold of his pistol, or to force his way out of Keno Kit's clutches.

"Who are yer calling Mame?" demanded the woman, as she threw the black cloak from her head and showed her face to Brill and Keno Kit. "My name is Ruth Howard!"

"Ruth, you're er daisy!" exclaimed Keno Kit, delightedly, as he obtained a tighter hold upon the throat of Jim Brill.

Hardly were the words uttered, when something struck the detective on the back of the head, and a sarcastic voice said:

"I'm afraid I cannot allow this lawless business to continue, although it pains me to interfere."

"Guy Bland!" exclaimed Ruth Howard, turning quickly, and recognizing the well-dressed, well-groomed figure of Bland, standing in the shaft of light from the signal office door.

"An' Desmond O'Brien, too," put in the voice of the Irishman, as he threw himself upon Guy Bland.

Then there was the crack-crack of revolvers, and Keno Kit became unconscious.

CHAPTER XXII.

A RACE WITH FIRE.

When the detective recovered his senses he found himself in a car of the freight train, with Otis Garland and Desmond O'Brien looking down at him anxiously.

"Ah, faith, Oi knew thot a swipe on the head wouldn't settle th' hash av sich a foine bye," exclaimed Desmond, cheerfully, as the detective opened his eyes.

There was a small lantern, of the railway pattern, hanging on the side of the car, and he was able to see that there were several people in the car.

There was a pleasant smell of corn and wheat, that told him what the car had been used for last, and he saw that the door was closed, so that no one could see from the outside whether the car was tenanted or not. The only opening to the outside world was through the ventilator that ran along the whole length of the roof of the car, and was so made that the light would not be apparent to any one on the ground.

"Whar's Jim Brill?" asked the detective, as he arose to sitting posture, and felt his head to make sure that it was still on his shoulders, as it should be.

"He's all right, Kit. When ther rascal with ther waxed mustache knocked you out, we heard ther scrap, and came out, but it wuz too late then. Guy Bland ain't goin' ter git himself inter no trap if he kin help it, an' as soon ez he saw me, he skooted away, with Brill after him."

"Then they escaped?" exclaimed the detective, in a tone of deep chagrin.

"Only fer a while. Don't be worried about thet. We hev them dead ter rights, so sure ez my name is Abe Kimball. If it is Abe Kimball," he added, doubtfully. "Fer thar hez been so many queer things this last day or two, thet I'll be blamed if I know who I am, or whar I am!"

"Oh, you air all right, Abe!" laughed Ruth. "There ain't nothin' ther matter with you."

"But about ther gang?" interrupted Keno Kit, impatiently.

"Wal, ther gang hez all got erway fer ther present—all 'cept one. We hev her."

"Who?"

"Her."

Abe Kimball pointed to a bundle of clothing in one corner of the car, where the rays of the lantern hardly reached, and then the bundle of clothing moved and Keno Kit saw that it was a woman.

"Mame Ray!"

The singer arose and shook herself, as she came forward, and looked at the detective, who had also risen, and was convincing himself, by feeling his head and limbs, that he was not seriously hurt.

"They might have killed you, Keno Kit, if it hadn't been for this young man," said the woman, pointing to Desmond O'Brien, who had been looking earnestly at Kit, as if to see whether he would be likely to need help.

Kit took the young man's hand and gave it a hearty grip.

"Desmond, you are a jewel."

"Be jabbers! Oi dunno thot. But Oi wuzn't goin' t' let thot omadhaun av a Guy Bland rub yez out, whole Oi hod er fist on me, so Oi wuzn't."

"But whar air they? Thet's ther question."

"They hev started fer Tip Top, by wagon. I saw them gittin' out over ther rise yonder not more'n an hour ergo, an' I guess they air well out over ther mountains by this time."

Abe Kimball spoke calmly, but the detective was quivering with excitement, now that he found that he was unhurt.

"How long hev I been lyin' hyar?" he asked.

"About an hour an' a half. We see thet yu'd dropped inter er kind of sleep, an' we thought it wuz ther best thing ter let you alone fer erwhile. Now you air all fresh, an' redy fer anything."

"Whar's Otis?"

"Here I am."

Otis Garland, who had been lying quietly in a corner of the car, came forward with a smile.

"And the flash money? Whar is thet?"

"It's hyar all right."

"Good. Now, fer ther gang! I'll chase them down till I get 'em if it takes me er year. I'm in this hyar thing fer keeps now," exclaimed Kit, as he examined his revolver, and put fresh cartridges into the chambers.

Half an hour later a heavy wagon, with a tilt, of the kind known as a "prairie schooner," with good, solid wheels, for mountain roads, pulled out of Phenix, Abe Kimball sitting in front, holding the reins on the two powerful horses, while inside were Keno Kit, Otis Garland, and the two women, Ruth and Mame Ray.

There was a trail that skirted the mountain, and then led across the plain, and it was calculated that, if a steady trot were maintained, it would be possible to get to Tip Top before the Black Oath Gang, on the Express wagon, could procure a change of horses and continue their journey toward Prescott, where, doubtless, they would take the branch railroad to connect with the Santa Fe, and so on to the East.

"But yer can't tell me, Kit, thet they

mean ter give up Otis ez quietly ez thet. We want ter keep er sharp look-out, fer I'll swa'r they mean ter hev thet boy yet afore they light out fer Chicago."

"I wish they would try ter take him," was all that Keno Kit said, in his quiet tones, as he made himself comfortable on a pile of straw inside the wagon.

It was still pitch dark. In fact, as it drew toward morning the gloom intensified. There was a slight wind blowing, and the air was fresh and pleasant. For half an hour they drove in silence, over the rough stones and among the stumpy mesquite grass and furze that grew everywhere.

Abe Kimball was an adept with the reins, and as he knew that the wagon was strong, and that the horses were powerful, he did not hesitate to tackle everything that came in his way in the way of stumps or boulders, knowing that he could pull over them, and not rack his wagon to pieces. It made it rather jerky for the people inside the wagon, but that made no particular difference.

Mame Ray and Ruth Howard sat at the back of the wagon, talking earnestly.

"So you don't belong to any of the gang?" questioned Ruth, continuing a conversation that had been carried on since they left Phenix.

"No, except that the only relative I have in the world, so far as I know, is Silas Sloper. We lived in Illinois, and when Silas and his sister, 'Mandy Perkins—"

"Hold on thar!" interrupted Ruth. "Don't let's hev no mistake erbout this hyar. If 'Mandy Perkins is Silas Sloper's sister, how does it come thet their names is different?"

There was a ring of suspicion in Ruth's tone that made Mame's face flush, although it could not be seen in the darkness. But she answered, calmly:

"'Mandy is Silas's step-sister. Sloper's mother married twice."

"Go on."

"My name is Perkins. My father was the brother of 'Mandy's father."

"Gosh! I feel ez if I wuz losin' my mind. You're a pretty mixed up lot, ain't yer?"

"May seem so to a stranger, but I understand it well enough," returned Mame. "I changed my name so that I wouldn't be known when I went on the stage. I was a singer in Chicago, before I came out here. But Silas was always good to me, and when he asked me to come to Arizona, I came, naturally enough."

"Naturally," agreed Ruth.

"Well, I couldn't help knowing what was going on, because Silas took me to the place up there at Maricopa, or Devil's Canyon, and I saw a great deal more than I wanted to see. But I couldn't go back on my own relatives, you know."

"Wuz 'Mandy in it?"

"Not any more than I was. But she, like me, couldn't help knowing, and Silas Sloper is her brother, don't you see?"

Ruth nodded.

"But when they wanted to kill this young fellow, Otis Garland, it was a different thing, and I determined to stop short at murder. So I came out at the theatre and put the rest of your party on their guard. There was a nice little plot to do up Keno Kit and Abe Kimball, and then get away to Chicago till the trouble had blown over."

"Mame, you're a squar' critter, an' I like yer," exclaimed Ruth Howard suddenly, as she took the hand of her companion and squeezed it heartily. "But I wish that Silas Sloper wuzn't yer cousin, fer I'm afraid he'll be hanged some day."

"Hello, what's that?" came from Keno Kit, who had been peering out from the curtains of the wagon into the darkness.

"What do yer mean, Kit?" asked Ruth.

The detective's answer was a prolonged sniff.

"Thet's so, Kit. I kin smell it, too."

As Ruth Howard uttered these enigmatical words, she pushed aside the curtains on her side and looked out into the darkness.

"Say, you fellers back in thar, do yer smell anything?" cried Abe Kimball, from his perch on the driver's seat in front.

"I should say we do," answered Ruth. "You'd better be putting them old plugs of yours along if we ever mean ter git ter Tip Top, or ter any other place on airth, I tell yer."

Otis Garland had not said anything, but he looked out, through the curtains, and sniffed loud and long.

There was no need for any one in the party, even Mame Ray, to tell each other what they feared. The evidence was strong enough to speak for itself, and each felt that the only thing now was action, prompt and determined.

The whole prairie was on fire, and they would soon find themselves struggling with an enemy as relentless as any that could take human form!

The fire had caught in the dried shrubbery on the other side of the mountain, and now, as the pungent odor of scorched grass and timber came pouring on them, they could feel that the air brought a hot breath from the unseen foe.

Which way to go? That was the question. But they were Western men in charge of that wagon, and the motto of the West is "Onward!"

So Kimball gave his two horses a touch with the whip, and the wagon leaped forward as if it had been struck by lightning and endowed with a new means of locomotion.

"Ut's comin' on us, Abe! We'll hev ter hustle, ef we air goin' ter beat it," said Ruth, as she walked to the forward part of the wagon, and looked out by the side of the driver.

"But we'll beat it all ther same," remarked Abe Kimball, grimly, as he gave another lash to the horses, and sent them forward faster than ever.

Now a great cloud of black smoke came rolling over the hill on their right, and they could detect a faint lurid glow in the black sky, that told of a relentless enemy lurking on the other side.

"Hold on thar!" shouted Abe, as the wagon tilted for a moment on a big stone, and threatened to go clear over.

It righted at once, however, and away the wagon sped down the slope that skirted the hill.

"This hyar is quite exciting!" remarked Keno Kit, coolly.

Onward! Onward! It was a race for life!

"Shall we make it?" whispered Ruth to Abe Kimball.

Abe Kimball clenched his teeth, as he gave another lash to the two horses, thundering along, and muttered, with cool determination, in which there was almost the note of despair:

"We'll try, by thunder!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A COWARDLY SHOT.

On, on, pressed the horses!

"This is er great gait we're doin'," observed Ruth to Mame Ray, as they swung around a bluff, with two wheels of the wagon in the air.

"I wonder where the gang are?" responded Mame.

"Thet's so. I never thought of them. Say, Abe, hev yer seen anything of ther express wagon, with them fellers in it?"

"No. Nor do I want to," was Abe Kimball's short reply, for he was too busy with his horses to care for anything else at that particular moment.

There could be no question about the fire now. It was blazing up right in their path, a solid wall of yellow and red, with a great cloud of black smoke above, that was tinged on the lower edge with the reflection of the flames.

The wind brought the heat in gusts, and anon occasional fragments of

burned stick or a tuft of half-destroyed grass, still smoldering redly within, swept up to the wagon, and fell under the horses' feet.

It was getting hot in every sense.

Kimball had a plan of action to escape the fire, although he appeared to be rushing on, without any clearly-defined intention save to get to safety. He had seen, as he drove the wagon clear of the mountain, and skirted the valley on his right, that there was a space on the extreme left that would allow him to get past to the country beyond, if he could only get there in time.

"The fire is spreading thet way, though, Kit," he muttered, as his sharp gaze traveled over the prospect. "It is only a chance we hev of makin' it, an' if we don't git thar in time, ther Black Oath Gang won't matter nothin' ter you; I kin tell yer thet."

Keno Kit answered with a nod of assent.

The road, which was a mere wagon trail, over which they were galloping, was bordered on the right by a deep cut that ran down to the valley, and that was rapidly becoming a caldron of seething flame, while on the other side was a waste of rocks and hollows, that were utterly impassable, even for a man on foot, and therefore not to be thought of for a wagon.

It looked as if a mighty mountain had been smashed to pieces in some convulsion of nature, strewing the fragments about in anger, to prevent the site ever being used for anything that might be to the advantage of man.

"We'll hev ter run along hyar fer nearly two miles afore we kin git out," said Ruth, who had been watching the outlook with a grave frown on her bright young face. "If yer pull us out of this, Abe, I'll think you air ther smartest man ez ever handled a rein, an' I'll be proud of yer fer my brother-in-law."

Abe Kimball did not speak again. He had business on hand, and it was no time to be wasting his breath on idle conversation.

With a firm grasp on the reins, but allowing the horses to put forth as much of their strength as he thought wise, he kept the wagon straight on the trail. A swerve to the side might throw it headlong into the valley, where the scorching flames rose high above the banks, or, on the other hand, break the legs of the horses among the sharp stones that threatened them on the left.

The fire was high in the heavens now, and the heat of the air made breathing a difficult thing.

"We shall hev er picnic afore we're out of this," said Ruth, to Mame Ray, as she stepped back into the wagon, glad to escape for a minute from the smoke and heat outside.

"Where do you suppose the other wagon is—the wagon with Silas and the others in it?" asked Mame.

"Blamed ef I know. They may hev got past ther fire, or they may be scootin' along over thar ter ther left, whar we air tryin' to go, or they may be burned up in ther valley. It's all er chance, yer see, an' I don't know ez they kin tell more erbout er fire, or how to dodge it, than Abe Kimball."

The fire was very close now, and it became necessary to take measures of protection as far as was possible.

"We can't breathe this hyar heat an' smoke," said Keno Kit. "How many silk handkerchiefs are there in ther party?"

"Be jabbers, Oi have wan," answered Desmond O'Brien, who had been silent for an hour, but who had evidently been doing a heap of thinking, judging by his sober face.

"I hev one, an' so hez Otis, and Abe hez one."

"So hev I," added the detective.

He went to the front of the wagon, where the fierce glow on the countenance of Abe Kimball, as he held his horses in,

showed that he was gazing straight ahead with the nerve characteristic of the Western sport.

"I'm goin' ter put yer handkerchief over yer face, Abe."

"All right."

The detective loosened a black silk handkerchief that Abe had taken from his pocket and put around his neck at the commencement of the wagon journey.

"I'll fix it for yer, Abe."

"All right."

The voices of both men were grave, for they knew that the next fifteen minutes would decide whether they were to get away from this demon that threatened to destroy them, or be charred into shapeless masses that might be found afterward, and might not.

Would that trail ever come to an end?

The valley on the one side, and the rocky waste on the other, were still there, and the horses, maddened by the flames, were still galloping, obedient to the touch of Abe Kimball's hand on the reins, and the occasional little reminder from the tip of the whip.

Kit tied the silk handkerchief over Abe Kimball's mouth and nose, and the relief experienced by Abe was acknowledged by him with a nod.

In five minutes all the rest of the party were similarly protected, except Mame Ray.

"Hello! What's this? Hevn't yer got er handkerchief?" exclaimed Keno Kit.

"No."

Without hesitation the detective took the handkerchief from his own face and bound it over the woman's.

"I guess I kin stand it better than you," he remarked quietly.

"Git up, thar!" yelled Abe to his horses, with a ring of hope in his voice, for he saw that he was near the end of the trail, and that a dozen strides would take him around the corner.

Once around that corner, it would be a race with the flames, but a parallel race, instead of driving right into the teeth of the fire, as they had been doing for an hour.

The rocky space on the left had been gradually rising for the last few hundred yards, and was now so high that Abe, on his seat, could only just see to the top of it, by glancing straight up over his head.

The flames were almost upon them as the horses swung sharp around the corner to the left, and showed them a straight road, if they could only follow it.

The fire leaped over their heads and licked up the verdure on top of the ledge as if it were venting its rage on it because it could not go any further in this direction.

The situation of the wagon was an awful one. On the left was the high, perpendicular rock, up which it would be impossible to climb, no matter how hard pressed they might be, while on the right roared the fire, stopped from coming to them only by the broad road that had nothing for the flames to feed on.

"Thunder! This hyar's a hot box!" muttered the detective, who had fastened an ordinary cotton handkerchief over his mouth, and was nearly suffocated by the smoke and heat. It is a fact pretty well known that a silk handkerchief will form a perfect respirator, but that no other fabric is quite so good. So that when the detective gave up his silk handkerchief to Mame Ray and put his cotton handkerchief over his own face, he was doing a more unselfish act than might have been supposed by those who did not understand the matter.

"Git up!" yelled Abe to his horses, and he gave a shake to the reins and a whirl of the whip that the animals understood, for they quickened their pace and kept straight to the road, although the burning fragments from the fire struck them continually, and maddened them to the last pitch of endurance.

The wagon took fire in half a dozen places!

"Mind ther wheels!" yelled Kit. "Never mind about ther rest of it, but don't let ther wheels burn!"

He leaned over the sides of the vehicle and brushed the flames away with his broadbrimmed soft hat, with Otis Garland and Desmond O'Brien following suit. The three men kept the fire from spreading and so far managed to save the wheels.

The smoke was thick, but fortunately there was some wind, which took it away in puffs at intervals, so that it was possible to bear it, by keeping low in the wagon. As for Abe, he kept his eyes closed most of the time, and allowed his horses to follow their instincts.

Suddenly the thud of other hoof-beats came plainly to the people in the wagon, but some distance ahead, as the wind turned in the right direction for an instant.

"Somebody else caught in this hyar snap, I guess," muttered Keno Kit.

"Git up!" bawled Abe to his horse, in desperation.

There was at least a quarter of a mile to go before the end of the wall of fire would be reached. Beyond that was a stretch of rocks and grass that would enable them to continue their journey to Tip Top.

The fire was still running along the sage-brush, however, and it was making such good time that the wagon would probably have considerably more than the quarter of a mile to travel to reach safety.

"Thar's a big patch of rock along thar, however," muttered Keno Kit, "an' if we hev luck, thet ought ter stop ther run of these hyar flames. But yer can't allers tell, and mebbe ther cussed fire will jump cl'ar over it."

"Be jabers, if it does, oi'll hev no funder use for Arizony, so Oi won't," put in Desmond, his brogue, muffled by the handkerchief, sounding strangely comical.

Ruth and Mame were both sitting still in the bottom of the wagon, Ruth holding her companion's hand, to reassure her.

"Thar's cl'ar grit in thet thar gal," observed Keno Kit, admiringly, as he noted the action, and saw that Ruth was perfectly calm under the terrible strain.

The horses dashed along, and the sound of the hoof-beats ahead became plainer.

"We're gaining on those fellers in front, whoever they air," said Keno Kit. "I hope it's ther Black Oath Gang. 'Cause ef it is, it will save us er lot of trouble."

So far the race along this road, parallel with the fire, had been maintained without injury, for the detective and his two companions had kept the wheels from burning, and the rest of the wagon was all right.

"By George! I can see ther other wagon!" cried Keno Kit, suddenly, as he looked up from the wheel he had been working at with his hat, and gazed ahead through the smoke and haze.

"Who is it?" asked Otis.

"Is it thim shpalpeens we're after?" demanded Desmond. "Oh, let me git wan swipe at 'em!"

Desmond was spoiling for a fight, the heat and smoke having stirred all the combativeness in his nature.

"They're pretty near petered out," growled Abe, through his handkerchief, as he continued to stir up his horses with rein and whip. "I kin run 'em down in another five minutes."

"Go for 'em, then," returned Kit.

The wagon in front could be seen wabbling from one side to the other, as if the horses were either beyond control, or so exhausted that they could not draw the wagon straight. There was a cover to the wagon, but it was open behind, and the tall hat of Silas Sloper was easily distinguishable inside.

"Thar's thet blamed greaser!" yelled

Keno Kit. "Lay ter it, Abe. Hurry up! I'd jist ez soon be burned ez ter let them fellers git erway now."

"Speak fer yerself, Kit. I ain't with yer on thet," said Ruth, with a little laugh.

"What er plucky kid she is," muttered Keno Kit.

"Who's drivin' thet thar hearse, I wonder?" growled Abe.

Kimball felt now that the chances of escape were good, for it was not far to the end of the fiery route, and already there was more space between the rocks on the left and the fire on the right than there had been, and the oppression from heat and smoke was getting less every moment.

Otis and Desmond had stepped to the front of the wagon, and were looking out, by the side of Abe Kimball, while Keno Kit had gone back to speak to Ruth.

"Jim Brill must be driving," said Otis. "But he doesn't seem to be doing it very well."

Bang!

A bullet whistled past Abe Kimball, and Otis uttered a slight cry of pain.

"What's ther matter, Otis?" asked Keno Kit, excitedly, as he ran to him.

Otis took his hand away from his cheek, and showed that there was blood on it.

"It's nothing much," he said, quietly. "But it came near wiping me out."

Keno Kit pulled him back into the wagon, so that he was sitting down out of sight; and then looked at his cheek!

There was a blood-red furrow across it, showing where a bullet had plowed its way from the corner of his mouth to his ear.

"Ther or-nary cuss!"

As Keno Kit uttered these words, in a tone of deep disgust, he looked out of the wagon again, and saw Silas Sloper, pistol in hand, looking back, with a grin of malignant hatred, evidently looking for another chance to fire at the boy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN EMPTY TRIUMPH.

"Thet means thet I'll foller thet thar Silas Sloper ter ther end of creation, even if ther other fellers get away," declared Keno Kit, thumping his fist on the edge of the wagon.

"Ther other fellers won't git away," answered Abe. "We've ez good ez got 'em now."

To emphasize his words, Abe shook up the reins, and his two horses forged ahead, rapidly shortening the distance between their own wagon and that in front.

Silas Sloper had gone inside, and the detective could hear him urging the driver to make the horses go faster.

The line of fire was nearly at an end now, and in a few minutes both wagons would be entirely out of danger. There was one spot, however, where the line of fire was much nearer the rocks, and that must be passed quickly if it was to be passed at all.

At this moment the first wagon reached the place, and, with a rush and a whirr, went through, although the people behind could see that it was on fire in half a dozen places.

"Now for it, Abe!" shouted Kit.

Abe stirred up his horses, and they bounded forward, with their heads tossing in excitement, to plunge into the thick smoke and flames that disputed the way.

In half a dozen strides they would be through the dangerous place, when Otis cried loudly:

"Look out, Abe! See!"

Abe Kimball saw the trouble even before Otis had yelled, but it was too late to stop then, and even if he had stopped, their position would not have been any the more desirable.

Silas Sloper had leaped from his wag-

on, with Pete Morrelli, the Mexican, and the two men had dragged out an immense branch of a pine tree, all blazing, and drawn it right across the path.

In another minute the horses had dashed into it, and with a wild scramble that could not save them, had fallen over, with the wagon in a heap on top of them, in the midst of a blaze that threatened to annihilate them off-hand.

The wild laughter of Silas Sloper rang out above the confusion, and as the detective struggled from the debris, and pulled Ruth Howard and Mame Ray to their feet on the further side of the fire, Silas continued, in a mocking tone: "Yea, verily!"

"Whar's Otis?" exclaimed Kit.

He could see Kimball, standing by his side, dazed by the smash, as he brushed off his coat with his hands, with a tender solicitude, that would have been laughable at a less terrible moment, while Desmond, who had been thrown forward to the ground when the wagon broke down, sat looking ruefully about him, evidently with a very confused idea of where he was, or what had happened.

"Wal, we're all right, I guess, 'cept ther horses," remarked Abe, quietly, as he glanced around him. "Ther poor critters are about done, I am afraid."

The detective examined the wreck, but he saw that nothing could save the horses, so, without a word, he fired a bullet from his revolver into each of their heads, and then, seeing that they were not quite dead, fired the remainder of his six bullets into them.

He had just placed his hand to his cartridge belt for more cartridges when a yell came from Silas Sloper, and at the same time a shot from that gentleman's revolver only just missed Otis.

"You scoundrel!" shouted Otis, and, before any one could prevent him, he bounded forward and seized Silas Sloper by the throat.

The attack was so sudden that the plug hat fell to the ground, and at the same moment Otis seized his enemy's revolver and dragged it from his hand.

"Hold him, Otis!" yelled the detective, springing to his assistance, revolver in hand.

Jim Brill came from the front of the wagon, and Kit pointed his pistol at his head and fired.

There was only a feeble click. The revolver was unloaded! The detective had spent his six cartridges to put the horses out of their misery, and he was at the mercy of his foe.

With an oath, Brill raised his own revolver, but before he could get the drop on Kit there was another shot, and Brill's revolver went spinning out of his hand. The bullet had struck his hand, and the weapon had been knocked from his grasp.

"Good shot!" said Kit, admiringly.

"Wal, Kit, I generally calculate ter hit anything ez I aim at," observed Ruth Howard, coolly, for it was she who had come to the rescue so opportunely.

In the meantime Silas Sloper had been reinforced by Pete Morelli, and, before the party behind realized what was to be done, the Mexican and Sloper lifted the boy into the foremost wagon, Brill jumped to the driver's seat, and amid a fusillade of bullets from Ruth Howard, Desmond and Abe Kimball, the wagon dashed away.

"Wal, ef they ain't er purty slick gang, arter all," said Abe Kimball, with some admiration, in spite of his being so angry at the outcome of the chase.

"Come! Don't let it go this hyar way," returned the detective. "Ther horses in thet thar wagon must be purty well played out, an they can't go far."

"Yure roight, Mr. Kit, indade ye are. Oi'm wid yez, too, an' Oi don't mane ter let thot bye be tuk away by thim villains, no Oi don't, be jabbers."

"Thet Irishman is right," added Ruth Howard, as she ran along the road, after the wagon, leading the way for the others.

"Thet gal hez more sense than any of us," declared Keno Kit, with emphasis. "I believe if we ketch these hyar fellers, we'll hev her ter thank her fer it. Hyar we air, standin' aroun' like a lot of kids, while the gang is gittin' away from us. I'm after 'em."

He hastily loaded his revolver, and, picking up the weapon of Jim Brill, which that worthy had left lying in the road, when he made his hurried departure on the wagon, scuttled after Ruth Howard, who had already got a good distance along the road.

The fire was well behind them now, and there was no further danger from that, but the escape of the gang, with Otis Garland in their possession, was regarded as a worse calamity even than the fire by the detective.

The wagon ran along at a good speed for some distance, with Ruth Howard, Desmond O'Brien, Kit and Abe Kimball toiling along in the rear, while Mame Ray, utterly exhausted, walked away from the fire to a spot where she could not feel its heat, and watched the proceedings from afar.

"I dunno whether you air right about them thar horses being nearly played out," panted Kimball, who was not fond of pedestrian exercise. "They seem ter be makin' purty good time fer animals ez is done out, an' I don't care fer this kind of traveling. Next time I go chasin' a slippery crowd like this hyar Black Oath Gang, I'm er coyote ef I don't take care ter hev a horse with me, or somewhere within reach. When we git these fellers, ef we ever do, how in thunder air we ter git them back to Maricopa?"

"Hold yer horses, Abe. It'll come cut all right in ther wash," laughed Ruth Howard, as she kept up a sort of lope in her chase of the wagon.

The wagon still kept up its steady movement, and the detective, with Abe Kimball and Desmond O'Brien on either side, kept up a steady trot.

"We ain't goin' ter be beaten by a gal, ef I know it," observed Keno Kit, as he slapped Kimball on the back, heartily.

"By George, they're slacking up already, I believe," shouted Kimball, cheerfully, as he saw that the wagon had stopped.

It was still dark, but the glare of the fire enabled them to see everything in the neighborhood perfectly plain. The way now led along the side of a thicket of pines which overhung the side of the trail, and the reflection of the fire on them made them appear almost as if they, too, were afire.

"What's ther matter with ther horses! Mebbe they've broken down?"

Silas Sloper's face, surmounted by the plug hat, appeared at the back of the wagon, between the curtains, and then Otis Garland's face showed by the side of it. Hardly had it appeared, when it disappeared suddenly, as if some one had pulled the boy backward, and then there came a laugh that they recognized as that of the Mexican.

At the same moment the wagon started again with a jerk, and the scuffling of the horses as they pulled at the vehicle told them that the wagon was being dragged along with a great deal of effort on the part of the poor animals.

"We shall ketch ther wagon all right," muttered Keno Kit, through his set teeth. "But I'h afraid they may rub out thet thar boy, an' if they do, I sha'n't care so much about ketching ther gang. I s'pose I ought ter think more about gitting thet gang inter jail than anything else, but somehow thet boy hez got er tight hold on my heart, an' I'm thinking about him."

"What air yer grumbling about over thar?" asked Ruth, as she looked toward the detective. "I'm thinkin' this is er good time ter keep yer spirits up, when we hev ther gang almost in our hands."

The wagon stopped once more, and there was a great deal of bustle inside that told of trouble of some kind.

"I wonder ef they're tryin' ter play dirt on thet thar boy!" muttered the detective.

The wagon stopped stock still, and the three men with Ruth dashed forward, pistols in hand, determined that the gang should not escape them now.

They could hear Jim Brill swearing at his horses, and the hoofs of the animals scuffling, but they could not move the wagon, not because it was stuck in any way, but on account of their strength being gone.

"We hev them now, ez sure ez ther sky is over us," exclaimed Abe, with a wave of his hand.

The next moment the three men had reached the wagon, and with a yell of triumph they sprung into it, with their weapons raised, ready to demand surrender.

The wagon was empty!

CHAPTER XXV.

DEAD, YET ALIVE.

"Ther trees!" shouted the detective, as soon as he saw that the birds had flown.

His companions knew what he meant, and all dashed into the thicket of pines, where the gloom was so deep that hardly anything could be seen, save where the light of the distant fire glowed here and there.

"They can't be far away," declared Keno Kit, savagely. "I must find them now, or ther whole territory will be laughing at me. Besides, they have ther boy with 'em, an' it means death ter him if we ever let them get away."

"What's thet over thar?" suddenly exclaimed Ruth, as she dashed among the trees at the top of her speed, leaping over the brushwood and stones as lightly as a deer.

For an instant his companions watched her as she ran, and then, with a yell, all started in pursuit.

The gang were among the trees, and Ruth had seen them all for a moment in a clearing a few hundred yards away.

She had only a glimpse of them, but it was enough to enable her to follow them with considerable certainty.

The chase was a short one. Ruth had a start of her companions, and she maintained her advantage.

The light of the fire—that was now dying down, since it had nothing more to feed on when it reached the ledge of rock to which reference has been made several times—was enough to show her a little which way to follow the gang, and she never lost sight of them for more than half a minute at a time.

"Ther mean cusses are gittin' around in er circle," she muttered. "They're like wild beasts, and don't know whar they are. But ther game is up with 'em this time, or my name ain't Ruth. I'll hang ter ther trail ef it kills me. But it ain't goin' ter kill me, not much."

As she said, they were circling. First she saw the Mexican, who was in the rear. Then she caught sight of Jim Brill, who was dragging Otis by a long riata fastened around his waist, that held his arms down to his sides, and that had evidently been slipped over his head hurriedly, for it was held only by the single slip knot, and was not tied in a complicated twist, as had been the case before when he was bound.

"Ther rascals! They'll kill thet boy ef we don't git to 'em soon," said Keno Kit, with real anxiety in his tone, as he and Abe ran side by side.

"Ef they do, it will be er bad day's work fer 'em, fer I'll skin 'em alive," hissed Abe.

Desmond O'Brien said nothing, but his teeth were clinched, and the flashing of his gray eyes told that he was terribly in earnest in the chase.

The fugitives turned suddenly to the right, and then ran straight forward. As they were out of sight part of the time when they executed this manoeuvre, their pursuers could not follow them in a direct line, but, like hounds on the trail of a fox that they are following by

scent alone, were obliged to take all the twists and turns of their quarry.

But the pursuit was a relentless one, and the gang knew as well as Keno Kit and Abe Kimball that there would be no let-up till the end, when they must fall into the hands of the avengers.

At last they came to a spot where there was a clear view of the flying men, with the boy in their power.

"I believe I could bring that Mexican down," said Ruth Howard, looking back at the detective, and drawing her six-shooter from her belt to aim it at Pete Morrelli.

"No! Hold on!" shouted Keno Kit. "He's right in their line of fire, an' it won't do."

"Who's in their line of fire? That's what I want," shouted back Ruth, defiantly.

"I mean Otis. Don't yer see, if you shoot at the Greaser, you must hit their boy, too?"

Ruth did not reply in words, but she dropped the muzzle of her revolver, which was proof that she accepted the warning of the detective as conclusive.

Jim Brill and Otis swung off to the right at this moment, and the light of the dying fire shone on them distinctly as they disappeared among the tree trunks.

The detective signed to his companions to make a swerve to the right, too, so as to cut off a corner, but the next instant he saw that it would not do, because it might result in their losing their game altogether, if the gang should happen to take another twist to the left, as they might if they were out of sight.

They kept straight on the trail, and soon had the satisfaction of finding that they were much nearer to them than at any time since they had begun the chase.

"Throw up yer hands!" yelled Keno Kit, as he pointed his revolver at Jim Brill's head.

The answer was a mocking laugh.

"Shoot erway, if yer like, but if yer do, ther Greaser will send er bullet through ther boy's skull. We know our business," bawled Jim Brill.

He would have carried out his threat undoubtedly, for the Mexican had the muzzle of his gun near the head of Otis as he ran, and at the same time was careful to keep his body between his pursuers and the boy, so that if he were shot, the chances were a hundred to one that the boy would fall too.

The detective replaced his revolver and dashed forward for a few yards at the top of his speed, so that he was level with Ruth.

"It ain't no good firin', I guess, Kit," she panted, for the pace was beginning to tell on all of them. "We must just keep swinging along till we git ter them."

The detective nodded, and continued to run.

The gang had been gradually turning till they were now heading directly for the trail where they had left their wagon.

"Confound them! they are goin' ter git back ter ther wagon ag'in, or I'm a Sioux," exclaimed Abe Kimball.

He had seen the intention of Jim Brill first, but his companions recognized the fact almost as soon as he.

Jim Brill, Otis, and the Mexican were about two hundred yards in front of their pursuers, and were running free, as sporting men say. Ruth, Kit, Abe and Desmond had been keeping at about the same distance behind them, but now, owing to the fact that they had exerted themselves so much at the beginning, and had, in their eagerness, leaped over obstacles that the gang had gone around, they were more fatigued than the men in front, and, in spite of their anxiety to overtake the desperadoes, were compelled to slacken their speed.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Jim Brill, as he saw, by a rapid glance over his shoulder, that his enemies were weakening.

The laugh made Kit's blood boil, but he could not put on any more steam, try

as he would, and he could only keep up his trot after them without gaining on them.

Where was Guy Bland? He had not been seen in the chase, and the detective had more than once wondered how it was that he had managed to keep out of sight.

The question was not yet answered, but Kit had no doubt that it would be soon.

They were getting near the road now, and the light of the fire, which had been on their right side when the chase from the wagon began, was of course on their left as they ran toward it again.

Otis Garland had been forced to run, but he hung back as much as he could—which was not much, with that cruel cord around his arms, cutting into his flesh at every tug.

But the boy's intellect was busy all the time, and he had determined to sell his life dearly, if he could only get his arms free. He had been striving to get his right hand to his belt, but the cord held him in such a position that, while he could touch the handle of his knife in the belt, which was the objective point of his struggles, he could not raise his fingers to it.

The only encouragement he had in the matter was that neither Jim Brill nor the Mexican seemed to see that he was trying to do anything for himself, and therefore they took no precautions to prevent his accomplishing his purpose.

They were very near the road now, and Jim Brill involuntarily loosened his hold on the riata for an instant. That instant was all that Otis needed. Like a flash his hand leaped to his knife, and he had it firmly in his grasp.

"What air yer doin' jerkin' like thet?" demanded Jim Brill, surlily, but without turning round.

"Nothing," answered the boy, humbly. The Mexican struck him on the head with the barrel of his pistol, but, as he wore his large felt hat, the boy did not feel it particularly, and took no notice of the insult.

"Whar in thunder is thet thar wagon?" exclaimed Jim Brill.

He had nearly reached the road, and, according to his calculations, the wagon should be just before him.

"Guess it must be further along," he continued, as he looked over his shoulder and saw that Keno Kit was still further behind, and that there was no immediate danger of falling into the hands of his pursuers.

He put on a spurt to reach the road, and looked up and down. Then he uttered an oath of dismay.

The wagon had disappeared!

"Cusses on it! What does this mean?" yelled Jim Brill, looking savagely at Pete Morrelli as if he would lay the blame of the trouble upon him.

The Mexican trembled, but he had nothing to say, in explanation.

"It's thet thar Guy Bland, fer a dollar," growled Jim Brill, as he looked fearfully behind him, and saw that Keno Kit and his companions were still coming toward him.

"He's got ze wagon, of course," suggested the Mexican.

Jim Brill scowled at him, and then a horrible determination came into his mind, to which he gave expression immediately.

"If we hev ter be caught, we'll settle this hyar feller anyhow."

He pointed to Otis, and drew his revolver.

The boy saw that this was a critical moment, and that it would be his last on earth unless he could help himself. Keno Kit was too far away to render him any assistance, and he must rely upon his own efforts to escape a terrible fate, if he was to escape at all.

"Yer young coyote! Ther whole trouble hez been through you, an' now ther business is goin' ter fall through on your account. Wal, it ain't no use talking about it now. Hyar's one fer you."

He raised his revolver slowly, as if gloating over the deed he was about to perform, and looking triumphantly at Keno Kit, who was too far away to arrive in time to save the boy, he prepared to send a bullet into Otis Garland's brain.

"Good bye, Otis, me young pard. Ef yer see yer old uncle over ther river, say 'Hello!' ter him fer me!"

There could be no doubt about the intention of Jim Brill to murder the boy, and Otis knew it. With a mighty effort the boy jerked up his hand with the knife in it, and the cord flew asunder, at the same moment that he seized the hand of Jim Brill with the pistol in it.

Bang went the revolver, but the bullet whistled over the head of the boy, and the Mexican, who had been taken entirely by surprise, actually dropped his own weapon to the ground.

There was an oath from Jim Brill, and another from the Mexican, as the boy dexterously thrust his foot behind that of Brill and tumbled him over on his back as neatly as it could have been done by a professional wrestler.

This was all that was required to detain him till Keno Kit and his companions arrived on the spot, and before Brill or the Mexican could make any resistance, they were fast prisoners.

"At last we hev yer, Mister Brill," said the detective, with a smile. "It hez been er long chase, an' you almost got ther best of us at last. But you wuzn't quite quick enough on ther trigger. Ef yer hadn't stopped ter torment thet kid he'd been gone by this time, and it wouldn't hev been much satisfaction ter ketch yer then. Ez it is now, we're all complete and comfortable."

"What air yer goin' ter do?" growled Jim Brill.

"Wal, thet's so. I don't know. It's too far ter walk yer back ter Phenix, and I hev'n't got no wagon or horses. Hello! What's thet?"

Keno Kit pointed into the thicket of pines a little way down the road, and all the others looked in the direction indicated by his outstretched finger.

Jim Brill uttered a shriek of awful fear, and fell flat upon his face, groveling in an ecstasy of terror.

Standing among the trees, where the dull red glow of the fire fell upon his features with a ghastly luridness, was the figure of the dead man, Roland Bland, his jaws working as if he were speaking, but with no sound issuing from the gray lips!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BACK TRAIL.

It was noon when the wagon that had rushed out of Phenix with Jim Brill, Otis Garland, Pete Morrelli, and Silas Sloper on board, drew into the town again, with the same people in it, and several others in addition.

Keno Kit, Abe Kimball, Desmond O'Brien, Ruth Howard, and Mame Ray were all in the wagon, and the two horses were pretty well tired out when the outfit reached Phenix.

But there was a smile on the face of the detective, tired as he was, for he felt that he had achieved a victory that was worth something, and that he had at last accomplished his great desire, of wiping out the Black Oath Gang.

The prisoners were firmly tied, and were lying in the bottom of the wagon. Used to all kinds of vicissitudes in the wild lives they led, they had accepted the situation with true philosophy, and, knowing that rest must be had, no matter what might befall them afterward, they had fallen asleep as soundly and unconcernedly as if they had been children, safely in bed in a peaceful home in the city of New York.

Everybody in the wagon was asleep except the detective. At first Kimball had taken the reins, while the detective enjoyed a nap of an hour or two. Then he had awoke, and given his place to Abe Kimball, who was quite willing to yield the reins, and, in his turn, take

a good sound sleep. The rest of the party had not been disturbed since starting on the return journey, which was soon after the apparition of Roland Bland had been seen in the pine thicket on the edge of the fire.

As the wagon drove into the town of Phenix, in the neighborhood of the railroad, where the broken freight cars still lay piled up at the side of the track, it was evident that some inkling of the adventure of the detective and his companions had come into Phenix in that mysterious manner in which news so often travels in sparsely settled localities.

There was Colonel Smith, the editor of the Phenix Gazette, leaning carelessly against the steps that led up to the signal house, looking calmly and unconcerned at the equipage as it rattled into town.

"Got 'em, boys?" asked the colonel, as he shifted his position enough to put his other leg in front of him.

The detective nodded, cheerfully. He would not have been disposed to answer what he might have considered an impertinent question were it not that he was so well satisfied with the result of his hunt that he would have answered any one at that moment.

"I hev ther jail all ready fer 'em," continued the colonel.

"What's thet?" asked Keno Kit, as he pulled up his horses, and looked down curiously into the wooden countenance of the tall, lazy-appearing man at his side.

"Ther jail. I don't s'pose you mean ter give him a suite of rooms at ther hotel, do yer?"

"No, not exactly. But what hev you ter do with ther jail?"

"Oh, I happen ter be sheriff of this hyar county. Thet's all," answered the colonel, carelessly, as he lighted a fresh cigar.

"Hev yer got yer—"

"Cert'nly," interrupted the colonel. "I know what you air goin' ter ask. You air a United States marshal, but you don't seem ter know all ther county officials in Arizona. Hyar it is."

As the colonel spoke he drew from his pocket a large official-looking document, emblazoned in gilt and colors, and bearing the county stamp, which declared that Colonel Clay Smith had been duly elected sheriff, and was authorized to serve for the regular period.

"Wal, colonel, I'm glad ter meet yer," said Keno Kit, as he recognized the validity of the paper at a glance. "I don't know how it is ez I hev'n't made yer acquaintance before."

"Don't apologize, Mr. Vance. I'm not ez well known a man ez you air, though I am the editor of the Phenix Gazette. Everybody knows Keno Kit in Arizona, an' we're all mighty proud of yer. I hed an idee of interjucing myself afore yer started out after this hyar gang, but I thought I could afford ter wait till you came back with ther rascals, so thet I could make myself known an' congratulate yer at ther same time, an' do it all under one."

"You thought I'd bring 'em back, eh?"

"I knew yer would," answered the colonel, with sententious emphasis.

"Thanks for yer good opinion. Whar is ther jail? I hev never seen it since I've been hyar."

"It's right over thar, across ther railroad track. I'll show yer."

The colonel lazily drew himself up from the bottom of the steps against which he had been leaning, cross-legged, and strolled leisurely across the street.

The colonel stopped in front of a building that looked like a large packing case, for it had no windows, and was bound with strips of iron on the edges and across the front. In the centre was an iron door, and this the colonel opened slowly and with much dignity, as befitted his official position.

Then he turned and beckoned to the

detective with a jerk of his head that made his long beard wiggle like a duck's tail as she comes out of the water.

Keno Kit drove his wagon up to the door and leaped down from the driver's seat.

"I'll take 'em right in, an' then I s'pose they will be safe," said Keno Kit.

"I will be responsible fer 'em, sir," returned the colonel, with much dignity.

"Good! Abe!"

"What's ther fun?" asked Abe Kimball, sleepily, as he struggled to a sitting posture, and blinked over the side of the wagon at the detective.

"We've arrove; thet's all. Help me git these hyar fellers out. They're all lyin' in er heap under them coats and straw, an' I hardly know which is which."

Ruth and Mame were awake now, and Colonel Smith gallantly gave his hand to them in turn to assist them from the wagon, smiling as he did so with an expression that seemed to say: "See what a ladies' man I am, even if I do live in Arizona."

Otis Garland leaped out of the wagon and stood by the side of the two women, ready to assist in any way that might be required.

"Come out of this," commanded Abe, as he pulled himself together and seized Jim Brill by the leg.

"What's goin' on?" growled Brill, as he sat up and rubbed his eyes in surly astonishment.

"Why, you're goin' inter jail," returned Abe, grimly. "Come out o' this!"

Brill and Pete Morrelli had been tied together, so that they could not have made any resistance, even if they had been inclined. But they felt that the game was up, and they made no effort to get out of the strong clutch of Desmond O'Brien and Abe Kimball when those two citizens seized them.

"Take 'em right in, gentlemen! Put 'em in ther furthest cell. Then you kin keep ther other one fer ther rest of yer pris'ners," said Colonel Smith, cheerfully, as he followed them into his jail.

There was not much light in the little jail, which consisted of only three compartments—the hallway, which served as an office, with its high desk and stool, and two chairs—and two cells on the right, with heavily-barred doors. At the end of the hallway was a small window, guarded by thick iron bars, and in each of the cells there was another still smaller window, not more than a foot square, crossed and recrossed by iron bars.

Into the farther cell were thrust Jim Brill and Pete Morrelli, the detective unfastening the ropes that bound them as soon as they were inside.

"You didn't do thet much fer me when you hed me in ther crib down ter Maricopa," said Keno Kit, looking through the bars at Jim Brill, "but I am an officer of ther law, and not er scallawag of er counterfeiter, which makes ther difference."

As he turned away from the cell door he encountered the quizzical face of Ruth Howard, as she looked up into his face with a mischievous smile.

"Whar did yer say yer wuz goin' ter put yer other prisoner, Kit?"

"In this other cell, of course. I don't trust thet sanctimonious-looking Silas Sloper, an' I want him in er cell by himself. Ef he wuz in with any one else, I'd think he would be gittin' out somehow."

"Smart boy, Keno Kit! Thet's what yer air," returned Ruth. "But whar's yer other prisoner?"

Something in the girl's tone made Kit rush out in a hurry to see what was going on outside, and he understood at once that something was wrong.

"You don't mean to say?" he began, and stopped.

"Thet's what ther matter, Mr. Vance. Yer prisoner thet you said you hed in ther wagon has got erway," said Colonel Smith, coolly.

"Silas Sloper?" gasped the detective.

For a moment the detective was so taken aback that he could not speak. Then he clenched his fist, and with a stern countenance, that Ruth knew meant business, he said:

"He's gone—but only fer a very little while. I'll hev him before this time tomorrow, or my name isn't Keno Kit."

Ruth Howard seized his hand and wrung it with the impulsive heartiness of her nature.

"Keno Kit, I believe yer!"

"I hope you will, gentlemen, fer it's my opinion ez thar's too much deviltry in thet feller with ther plug hat ter make it er safe thing fer him ter be lyin' around loose," observed Colonel Smith, as he went into the jail to make sure of the safety of his prisoners.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEAD FACE AGAIN.

It is night, and the scene is the interior of the retreat of the Black Oath Gang at Devil's Canyon. There are two people in earnest conversation in the secret room in which the counterfeit money is made by the gang. The two people are Guy Bland and Silas Sloper.

"So you gave 'em the slip, eh, Sloper?"

"Yes. It wasn't an easy thing to do, with the Philistines oppressing me so sorely. But I bowed myself with all my might, and forced asunder my bonds. Yea, verily!"

"I should like to know how you got out of that wagon when they had you tied up like a trussed chicken, and were going to take you to jail with the others."

Silas Sloper smiled mysteriously as he took his plug hat from his head and brushed it carefully with his arm.

"Verily, it matters not how I delivered myself out of the hands of mine enemies, so that I did it. We are not here to talk over my misfortunes and difficulties, but to settle a transaction that will bring many shekels into the hands of both of us."

"You are an infernal ass in your way of talking, Silas, but you are anything but a fool in business," responded Guy Bland, with a rough admiration for his companion's shrewdness.

"Go on with your proposition."

"Well, Silas, I do not say that I have made a proposition, but I should like to see what you think about this."

He stepped over to his companion and whispered. Silas started back and looked him in the eyes.

"Do you think it can be done?"

There was no affectation in the voice of Silas Sloper now.

"It must be done," replied Guy.

"How?"

Again Guy Bland whispered, and again there was that peculiar look in the eyes of Sloper, while the ladle with which he had been dabbling in the crucible and stirring the now melted metal, trembled in his long fingers.

A pause of nearly ten minutes, during which Silas Sloper continued to stir the metal, and Guy Bland lighted a cigarette and smoked contemplatively.

"Guy!"

"Well?"

"I'll do it."

There was an awful terror in the face of Sloper, and he could not assume the sanctimonious style of speech that was usual with him, try as he would.

"Very well. Now, let us arrange it. There is no one to hear us here, and we can talk out. This boy has got away from us, it seems—for a time. He is down at Abe Kimball's place, and there are half a dozen people watching him. They mean to take him East, and keep him where it will not be safe to try to settle his business."

"Now, there is a matter of \$20,000 insurance on his life, that was to have been divided between Jim Brill, Pete Morrelli and myself. I have had that assigned to myself, so that when the boy dies—if he should die—the money comes

to me. Brill and the Mexican are as good as dead already."

"They may blow on you," suggested Silas, looking up from the crucible.

"I intend to fix it so that they will not," answered Guy. "But to go on with my story. Besides the \$20,000 there is \$100,000 that comes to Otis from my dead brother, Roland—"

"And which would go to you, as next of kin, if the boy should die. I see—I see."

"You are right, of course, Silas."

"A fool could see that. But go on with your scheme."

"The boy must be disposed of as soon as possible, but, failing in that, we must produce a dead body that will pass for Otis Garland."

"Where are you to find this dead body?"

"I shall not find it at all. That is your part of the contract."

"Thanks."

"And, as to pay for the work, you will get \$25,000 of the \$100,000 legacy, and half of the \$20,000 insurance. Thirty-five thousand dollars is not bad pay for a trifling job that you can do without exerting yourself."

"I suppose you have some idea of where I can get this body, as you have all the rest of it laid out so well?" suggested Sloper, coldly.

"I have."

"I thought so. Go on."

"You know this girl Mame Ray?"

"My cousin? Yes, I know her, of course."

"This girl, Mame Ray, is so much like Otis Garland that if she were dressed in clothes such as he wears, no one could swear that it was not he, especially if she were dead, and there happened to be a bullet-mark or two on her face."

"You are a cold-blooded scoundrel," remarked Silas, quietly. "I feel like a saint when I compare myself with you."

The dark eyes of Guy Bland flashed fiercely, and he pulled nervously at his pointed mustache. But he continued:

"This girl is probably down at the Golden Glory to-night, with Keno Kit, and the rest. She must be got here in some way without any one knowing it."

"And you want me to decoy that girl here and murder her in cold blood, for—"

"Thirty-five thousand dollars," said Guy Bland, with a smile.

"Who will take the message?"

"I will. They can't prove anything against me, and it will be perfectly safe. Mr. Guy Bland, manager of the Maricopa mine, is too big a man to be injured by any one at Devil's Canyon, and if I choose to go to the Golden Glory saloon to speak to this woman it is nobody's business."

"But the boy must be got out of the way, if you are to make people believe that he is dead."

"Leave that to me, my dear Silas. I will decoy him away. In any case, I will take it upon myself to keep him out of sight."

"What a lucky thing it was that Roland Bland died, wasn't it?" said Silas, after a few minutes' silence. "It enables you to make a nice, profitable arrangement for yourself, and put something in the way of your friends, and—what a draught there seems to be in this room," he said, breaking off his remarks. "See how that curtain in front of the cupboard there is shaking."

"Yes, there is a great deal of wind puffing through these passages. I have often noticed it," returned Guy. "As you were saying, it was rather a lucky thing that that old curmudgeon of a brother of mine passed in his checks when he did, or—"

With a shriek of horror he stopped speaking, while he and Silas both stared, with bulging eyes, at the curtain in front of the cupboard.

It had been thrust partly aside, and there, grinning malevolently in the shadow, was the face of the dead man, Roland Bland.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GUY BLAND'S FATE.

Hardly had the two men realized what it was that they saw in the shadow of the curtain, when the single lamp that had given them light enough to carry on their conversation, went out, and the room was in pitch darkness.

Silas was the first to recover from his terror enough to move, and, fastening his precious plug hat more firmly on his head, he stole softly in the direction of the door.

What this dead man meant by continually appearing to him he did not know, but he felt that he could not bear the presence longer, and he would not.

He brushed against Guy Bland in the dark, and he felt the shiver that ran through his frame, as he did so. But he enjoyed the fear of the other so much that he actually smiled to himself in spite of his own horror.

"Silas!" whispered Guy.

Silas did not answer, but made his way steadily to the door, past the curtained cupboard.

He reckoned that he had just reached it, when he found that some one was clutching at the skirts of his coat, and was holding him so that he could not go on!

What could it be? There was no one in the room but Guy Bland, himself, and—the Presence!

And yet, Silas had never heard of a ghost holding a live man by his coat-tails, and, as his common sense came to his aid, he scouted the idea that it could be anything supernatural, after all.

"Thunderation! I'll find out what it is, if it drags me into the other world!" he shouted, in desperation.

Turning short around, he grappled with the Presence, and found it a solid individual, not very big, and with remarkably soft arms, into which his own fingers sank as he struggled with the mysterious being.

"Who are you?" he yelled, as he strove to force the being to the floor.

Guy Bland, who realized that, whatever the stranger might be, it was not a ghost, lighted the lamp, while Silas was still struggling.

As the light spread over the room, Silas Sloper uttered a cry of surprise: "Mame!"

"What?" shouted Guy Bland, in the very extreme of astonishment. "Who did you say?"

"Mame—Mame Ray!" answered Silas Sloper, as he stood back a little to look into the face of the woman whom the reader has already met several times in the Phenix variety theatre and elsewhere.

The false beard had dropped from her face, as well as the dark cloak she had worn to conceal her feminine dress.

He stooped and picked up the beard, which he adjusted on her face again, and then called the attention of Guy Bland to the effect.

"Verily, this is an exceeding surprise," he said. "Who would have thought she could make up as well as that?"

"She would pass anywhere for my brother, Roland Bland," declared Guy, "especially in a half-dark place. That is what it is to be a good actress. Miss Mame, I must congratulate you," he added, turning to the woman, and bowing low in mock reverence.

"That is all very well," remarked Silas, as he kept his gaze fixed on her face. "But how did you get here?"

Mame smiled scornfully, as she answered: "Why shouldn't I? Don't I know every twist and turn of this place as well as you—all except this room? And don't you think, if I was down here when you and Mr. Bland came down (as I was), that I could follow you to this corner, and see how you got in."

"You're a daisy, Mame. Yea, verily!"

"You had hardly got into this room when I was right after you. By the

time the lamp had been lighted I was behind that curtain, ready to scare the miserable life out of you. And I think I nearly did it."

"Smart girl—very smart girl. Yea, verily," responded Silas Sloper, with an ugly grin.

"Now, Silas," prompted Guy Bland, significantly.

"Well?"

Although Silas Sloper put this monosyllabic interrogation, it was superfluous, for he knew what Guy meant.

"Look here, Mame. We want to talk to you, now you are here," said Silas. "Where are the rest of the fellows that are trying to hunt down the Black Oath Gang?"

While Silas was speaking, Guy had stepped behind the woman, and was taking a small bottle from among the many others on a high shelf that was devoted to the chemicals used in the manufacture of the false money. The liquid was colorless, but the care with which Guy Bland handled it suggested that it was of a deadly nature.

"I have nothing to tell you," said Mame, in answer to Silas's question, while Guy made signs to Silas to take the bottle.

Silas reached out carelessly and seized the small bottle unseen by Mame, while Guy strolled to the other side of the room, smoking his cigarette unconcernedly.

"I am sorry you won't tell me, Mame, because it would make it much easier for all of us. Of course you can't ever go out of this place till you tell us about it. Things are pretty hot for the gang now, with Jim Brill and Pete Morrelli in jail, and the other members of the gang scattered about the country, and afraid to show themselves in Arizona."

Suddenly he thrust the vial into the mouth of the woman.

There was a momentary struggle, and then Mame managed to throw him off and snatch the bottle from her mouth, while Guy Bland, still smoking his cigarette, looked on in an unconcerned way, as if the whole performance were a perfectly commonplace happening.

"You rascal!" gasped Mame, as she leaped back, with the vial still in her hand, and her eyes blazing defiance.

Guy Bland seemed surprised when he saw that the woman was not hurt in any way, but that she had been able to free herself from the grasp of the other.

"You shallow-pated ass!" he bawled, as his passion got the better of his sang froid. "You forgot to take out the cork!"

"Kick me, hard. Yea, verily!" was all Silas said, as he realized what a blunder he had made.

In the mean time Mame had retreated, till she stood with her back against the door, while her hand stole into her pocket and grasped the butt of a six-shooter.

"There is no time for fooling now, Silas. Remember that," came from Guy Bland, in such a rasping tone that Silas Sloper hardly recognized it as the voice that was generally so soft and wheedling.

"I don't intend to fool," answered Silas, savagely. "I'm going to see this thing through now."

"Go ahead, then!"

With a howl of rage, Silas sprang upon Mame. He seized her by the throat and was about to force her backward to the floor, when she drew her revolver and pointed it directly at his head.

"You she-wolf!" he hissed. "You would shoot me, would you?"

He retreated as he said it, however, for there was something in the woman's eyes that he did not care to face, and he felt that it would be an easy thing for her to pull the trigger if she were disposed to do so.

"Now, Silas Sloper, I have the drop on you, and if I spare you it is only because the same blood runs in my veins that crawls through yours. But

come near me again, and that won't save you."

"Rot!" shouted Guy Bland, in a frenzy. "Who is afraid of a woman? I ain't!"

He darted toward her, and at the same instant she fired.

Guy stopped and put his hand to the side of his head.

"I'll make you afraid of a woman, both of you, if you give me any more of your nonsense," panted Mame. "I mean business."

"Yea, verily, she does," whined Silas, who seemed as if he would be glad to get out of the controversy on any terms.

Guy Bland took his hand from his head and showed that it was covered with blood. Mame Ray's bullet had nipped off a piece of his ear in the neatest kind of way.

In a greater rage than ever, he rushed upon the woman, knocked the pistol from her hand, when—the door behind her burst open and Keno Kit dashed into the room, followed by Abe Kimball, Desmond O'Brien and Ruth Howard, all with six-shooters in their hands.

"Hands up!" yelled the detective.

"Who are you?" shouted Guy Bland, defiantly, as he jumped forward, knife in hand.

It was the last word he ever spoke!

Crack! went the detective's revolver, and Guy Bland lay at his feet, a corpse.

Silas Sloper always prided himself on being a man of quick action. As soon as he saw Guy Bland drop, he realized that the general attention would be occupied with him—as indeed it was—and slid unostentatiously out of the room.

Silas had been gone probably a minute before any one missed him.

"Where is that sanctimonious cuss with the big hat?" asked Abe Kimball, all at once.

The detective laughed at the discomfiture of Abe Kimball, and actually enjoyed it so much that he did not care particularly for the escape of Silas. He contented himself with saying:

"He's er slick citizen. I allers thought it wouldn't be possible to hold him. Let him go. I'll get him again, some time or somewhar. He can't keep straight, and I'm sure ter meet him when he don't expect it. I know his sort of man."

Half an hour later the detective and his companions had examined every portion of the underground resort of the Black Oath Gang. Then Keno Kit put seals on all the locks, having taken possession of the place in the name of the United States, and the whole party went out, to enable the detective to look after his lawless birds in the jail at Phenix.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONCLUSION.

Colonel Smith sat in his office in the jail, big with the importance of the prisoners he had under his care, and determined that they should not get out of his sight. It was twelve o'clock at night, and he was expecting Keno Kit to arrive with more prisoners.

"I hev an idee he'll bring that thar Silas Sloper with him, anyhow, an' mebbe he'll find some more of that gang down in that thar crib of theirs. Anyhow, I wish he'd come an' look after these hyar fellers, fer I don't like ther responsibility of 'em."

As Colonel Smith thus delivered himself, he found himself face to face with Keno Kit.

"Wal, colonel, what's ther news?"

"Nothin'. Ther fellers air in hyar all right."

"Glad ter hear it, for they air all I hev."

"Whar's the chap with the big plug hat?"

"Hyar's his hat, but as fer ther man, he's gone, an' I don't expect ter lay eyes on him fer erwhile."

"I'll stay hyar ter-night an' keep watch on ther boys. I hev had so much

trouble with this hyar gang that I don't trust any of them."

Keno Kit had closed the door that led to the street and was leaning against the desk, with his back to the entrance.

He had lighted a cigar, and he and the colonel were both smoking contemplatively, with their gaze fixed on the cell doors.

Had the detective turned around, he might have seen a white face, with a very red nose, show itself slowly and cautiously over the edge of the desk behind, while a pair of fishy eyes looked longingly at the plug hat that stood in solitary majesty on the desk.

"I must have that precious covering for mine head, or all will be sadness and vexation of spirit. Yea, verily," muttered Silas Sloper, for he it was, of course.

He had stolen into the office before the door had been closed, and had been hidden under the desk during the conversation between Colonel Smith and the detective, waiting for an opportunity to get his clutches on his precious hat.

Gently he reached over till he could get his hand within a foot of his hat, but he could not reach it altogether unless he came around where he must be seen by the detective and colonel beyond all question.

"What am I to do?" he thought.

He spied the lariats that had been used to bind Jim Brill and Pete Morrelli, and which were lying under the desk where they had been thrown carelessly by the colonel.

"The very thing. I'll soon have it, and then good-by, Keno Kit and Devil's Canyon."

To pick up one of the ropes and make a loop in the end was the work of only a few moments, while the two men with their backs to the desk smoked contentedly.

"Now for one cast. I must make it the first time, or it will be all up with me."

He looked at the door, which was just behind him, and he calculated he could turn the handle, let himself out, and fasten the door again, before either Keno Kit or Colonel Smith would have time to use their pistols, rapid as they could be in the manipulation of their weapons.

Now came the supreme moment! With a dexterous cast, he spun the riata across the desk, and it caught the hat in its meshes and dragged it away.

At the moment that Silas Sloper put it on his head, with a cry of triumph, Colonel Smith and Keno Kit turned.

With a bound, Silas reached the door, tore it open, and was out on the street in the darkness.

The door slammed behind him, and the detective and the colonel rushed for it. They got the door open with a little difficulty, but Silas was out of sight.

They ran a hundred yards or so, but as they could neither see nor hear anything of the fugitive, they returned disconsolately and slowly to the jail.

"It would be er great joke ef them other two fellers had got out in the mean time," said the colonel, as they came in sight of the packing-case jail again. "The door is shut, and I can sw'ar I left it open."

"It blew shut, I guess," suggested the detective.

He pushed the door open, and then he stood still for a moment, and uttered the heartiest laugh that had come from him for a month.

There were Otis Garland, Desmond O'Brien, and Ruth Howard in the office, while in the midst of the group towered the comical plug hat, with the pale face of Silas Sloper beneath it.

"Hello, Silas! So they hev yer, eh?" said the detective, cheerfully.

"Yea, verily!"

"I don't think you'll git erway agin."

"I don't suppose I shall. I'm in the hands of the Philistines, and their hand rests heavily upon me. Yea, verily. But

I have my property, and I do not re-pine."

When he was shoved into the cell in which the Mexican was snoring on his wooden bench, Silas removed his plug hat, to bow with Chesterfieldian grace to Ruth Howard, who sniffed scornfully in response. Then he seated himself on the extreme edge of the bench, where he could find room, and assumed a dignity that was due largely to his consciousness that his plug hat made him a remarkable figure.

It was not difficult to find enough evidence to send the three members of the Black Oath Gang who had been caught to the penitentiary for long terms. The gang had been operating for so long and so extensively in Arizona that there were hundreds of witnesses, if they had been necessary.

The day after the three members of the Black Oath Gang had been taken to begin their sentences of twenty years apiece in the penitentiary there was a happy group sitting in the private sitting room of Abe Kimball, in the Golden Glory Hotel.

They were the proprietor of the hotel, Otis Garland, Ruth Howard, Desmond O'Brien, Mame Ray, Colonel Smith, and Keno Kit.

"Now, it is this hyar way," Keno Kit was saying. "Guy Bland is dead, and his affairs have been settled. The estate of Roland Bland, which includes shares in the Maricopa mine, besides \$100,000 in other property, all goes to Otis Garland, and he is now a rich man, beyond all question. I think it was a pretty good stroke of business to break up that Black Oath Gang, and at the same time get the fortune for the boy that they tried so hard to keep away from him."

"And I know to whom I am indebted for it, too," responded the lad. "I should never have got my property, nor even have been alive now but for the Arizona Detective's work in wiping out the Black Oath Gang."

"You are right, Otis," put in Ruth Howard. "He's a great boy, is that Keno Kit."

THE END.

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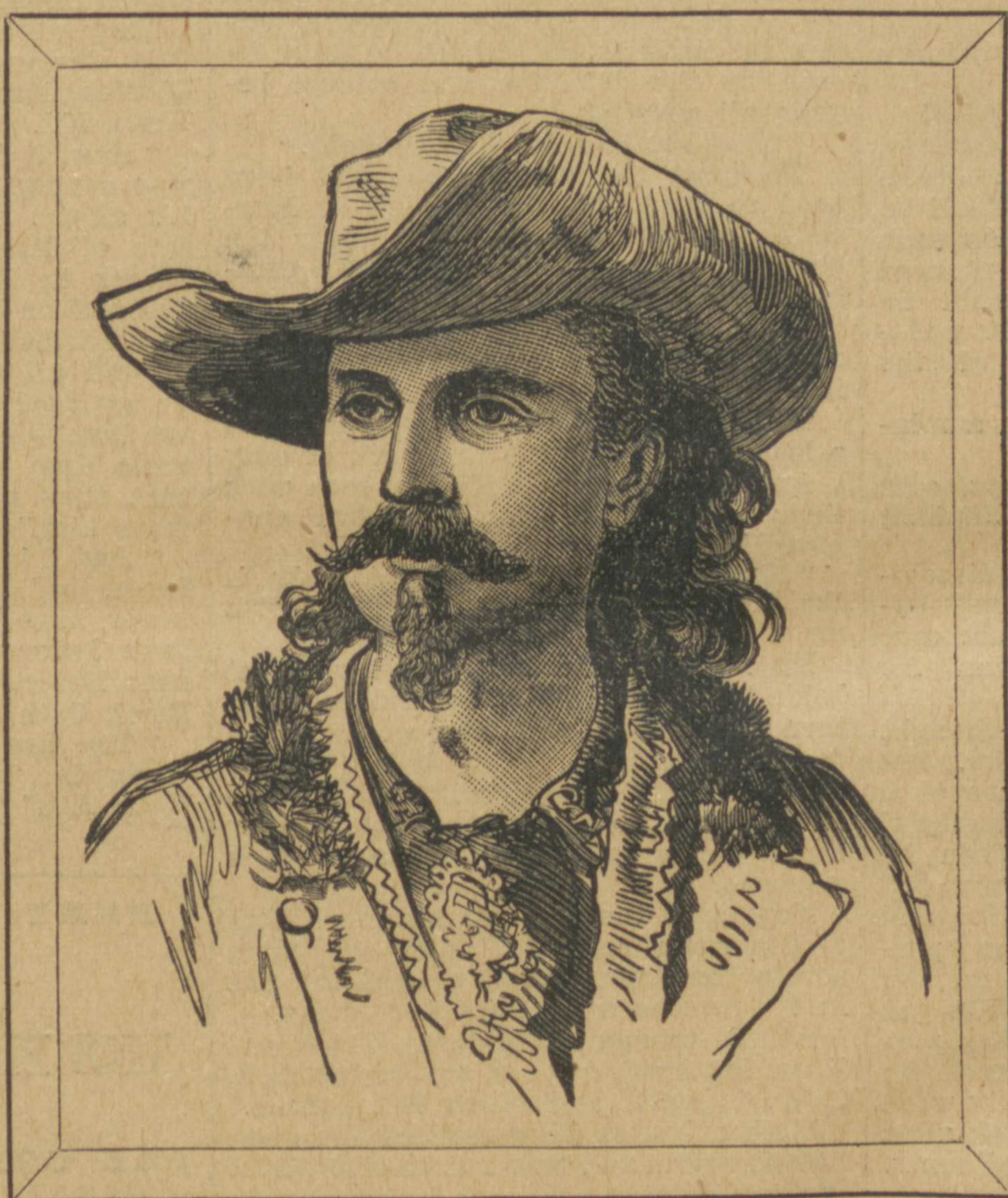
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